UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
3 1761 00080826 1

Presented

to

The Library

of

University College

University of Toronto

by

Professor Alfred Baker

January 15, 1941

4p
~~75~~
35

MAZEPPA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Crown 8vo. cloth, gilt top, 6*s*.

A FORBIDDEN NAME.

'We have to congratulate the author upon a thoroughly competent piece of work. The style is good and without affectations; the principal characters are drawn with a due regard for both the strength and shortcomings of human nature, and are conducted through their allotted parts with sympathy, consistency, and intelligence, whilst the parts allotted to them are such as to present dilemmas to each in his or her turn, and therefore to keep the author's brain busy and the reader's interested. . . . As good a novel of its kind as we expect to see for some time.'—MANCHESTER GUARDIAN.

'A well-thought-out study of unrest and political intrigue in the Russian capital soon after the death of the great Peter. . . . Alike in matter as in manner the novel is one of notable merit, and will be read with the greatest interest.'—SCOTSMAN.

'If you care for an historical novel of a time and of a country which have lain almost fallow in spite of their wealth of material, I can recommend to you Mr. Fred. Whishaw's "A Forbidden Name.". . . Whether Catherine was capable of the magnanimity she shows . . . readers in their breathless interest in the tale will hardly stop to ask.'—TRUTH.

'"A Forbidden Name" involves a good deal of free but effective handling of Russian Court history during the later decades of the last century.'—SPECTATOR.

'The pathos and historic interest of the book can be enjoyed in their full measure.'—DAILY EXPRESS.

'The theme is well handled.'—ATHENÆUM.

'The style is pleasant and easy.'—MORNING LEADER.

'Mr. Whishaw is an expert concocter of historical-adventure stories. . . . The story is well compacted of love, politics, and fighting.'—ACADEMY.

'Mr. Fred. Whishaw's customary skill in telling Russian stories has not deserted him in "A Forbidden Name.". . . The tale is brightly written, and contains much thrilling incident.'—DAILY TELEGRAPH.

'Mr. Whishaw may always be counted upon to speed a passing hour.'—GLASGOW HERALD.

'A stirring tale, told in the vigorous and graphic style characteristic of the writer.'—WESTERN MAIL.

'Full of adventure.'—ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

'The book is well written and is capital reading.'—DAILY NEWS.

'There is excitement enough in it to satisfy the most exacting reader, yet its most thrilling incident never exceeds the bounds of possibility. It is a volume all lovers of the semi-historical novel of adventure will revel in.'—LLOYD'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPER.

'A good lively tale of adventure.'—LITERATURE.

'It is well told, full of spirit, and the fighting parts are nothing if not realistic.—SATURDAY REVIEW.

'A most excellently narrated drama. . . . We can thoroughly recommend Mr. Whishaw's ab[illegible] interesting novel to the reader who likes artistic workmanship as m[illegible] stirring incident and drama.'—VANITY FAIR.

'A capital story.'—MIDDLESEX GAZETTE.

'The plot is at once stirring and pathetic. Mr. Whishaw has produced an unusually good book.'—GUARDIAN.

'The story is well told.'—LITERARY WORLD.

London: CHATTO & WINDUS, 111 St. Martin's Lane, W.C.

MAZEPPA

BY

FRED. WHISHAW

AUTHOR OF 'A FORBIDDEN NAME' ETC.

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS

1902

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO. LTD., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON

PR
6045
M535M3

LIBRARY
FRANKLIN
UNIVERSITY
COLUMBUS

1050672

MAZEPPA

CHAPTER I

I WILL begin my story from the moment when, at the age of sixteen, my destiny first came more directly in touch with that of Mazeppa, my cousin in the third degree and my compatriot. My father was Chelminsky, a captain under the renowned Hmelnisky, a great and honoured name among Cossacks ; for under his leadership our tribes threw off the yoke of the Polish King and became once more independent, as Cossacks should for ever be.

Mazeppa's father and mine were relatives, rivals, and near neighbours. The same may be said of Mazeppa and myself, for together we entered service as pages at the Court of John Casimir of Poland, and together we left it. Also, as I shall presently show, we were in after life in constant rivalry—whether as lovers, as leaders of our compatriots, or in any other capacity.

Our home was in Volhynia, near the borders

of Poland and of the Ukraine, and our estates were distant but three or four leagues from one another : thus as youths Mazeppa and I met occasionally, though not very frequently. Our educations differed considerably, for my cousin's tutor was a cultured Pole who held, and made no secret of his opinion, that the training of the mind is of greater importance in the life of a man than the training of the body, supposing that a youth must make his own way in the world. Therefore Mazeppa was brought up as a clerk, though possessing strength and activity of body which made easy for him the acquisition of skill in manly exercises ; while my father preferred that I should be made a soldier, a horseman, a swordsman—in a word, that I should become a true Cossack.

Nevertheless, when Mazeppa was sent as page to the Polish Court, my father being dead by that time, my mother wished that I should go also, in order to acquaint myself with the ways of princes and courtiers, and attain a knowledge of life in high places. The King being at this time anxious to oblige the Cossack nation, there was little difficulty in securing employment for us.

Neither Mazeppa nor I were popular among the Polish youths at Court, though I may say that the ladies were less disposed to cavil at us.

We were Russian, we were told, though we stoutly denied the fact, and Russians were to the Poles at this time as the sun to the ice. The Cossacks, emancipated by our great leader, with my father and others, had lately found it difficult to stand alone, and being obliged to choose for support between Russian, Turk and Pole, had chosen the former. We were therefore, strictly speaking, under allegiance to the Tsar. Moreover, we were of the Orthodox religion ; hence, though actually and jealously Cossack in nationality, we were, in a sense, and as our Polish companions loved to assure us, Russians. This was a constant source of quarrel between us and them, and in the end was the immediate cause of our departure from the Court of John Casimir.

In this quarrel, which I shall now describe, I was of course upon the side of Mazeppa ; so that our connection began not in rivalry but in friendship, and for a while after this event we remained the closest of friends, and if there was any feeling of rivalry it did not show itself.

It was I that had made a swordsman of Mazeppa, which is a proud boast ; for indeed—thanks to the instruction and practice which I gave to him during the earlier days of our life at Court—he became a very expert handler of the

foils—a pupil of whom any master might justly be proud.

The fatal quarrel was none of our seeking, but we were of an age when to fight is as natural as to breathe or to eat, though in the Court of King John Casimir personal encounters were not encouraged—were, indeed, strictly forbidden—a fact which rendered indulgence in the pastime a dangerous luxury.

There were five of us pages, all lads of sixteen, and at certain hours of the day it was our duty to assemble in the ante-room appointed to our use, and there to await His Majesty's pleasure.

On this day we five loitered long and wearily; and the King not appearing, and we having nothing better to do, we took to quarrelling—the three young Polish blades forming one party and we two Cossack youths the other.

I must confess that it was generally I who was at the bottom of the disputes in which we constantly engaged, though usually without coming to blows. Mazeppa was, perhaps, as independent in spirit and as quarrelsome as I, at heart, but his manners were better : he was more of a courtier than I, and also more cautious and less frank ; but his tongue when he used it bit very deeply.

'Here come the Russians,' said one of the

Poles, 'entering the room as though it were their own property.'

'Only Russians since the Cossacks overthrew the Poles,' replied I, cruelly throwing in his teeth for the hundredth time the victory of my father and his Cossacks.

'Poor Cossacks that cannot stand on their own legs!' laughed Vladimirsky, one of the three Poles, 'but must for ever hold hands with Pole or Russian, lest they fall for lack of support.'

'Who supported us when we thrashed you at Moldávetz?' said I. 'Moreover, it is better to be allied with a bear than a fox, though I protest we require neither, and it is certain that we hate both.'

'Peace, Chelminsky,' said Mazeppa, 'this conversation grows stale, we have heard it so often! Vladimirsky will never learn the difference between a Russian and a Cossack: he is short of understanding, for which we may blame his parents, but scarcely himself.'

'I will tell you,' began Zofsky, another of them, 'of what these two fellows most remind me, Vladimirsky. They remind me of a Russian bear and his keeper that I saw last spring in a street in the city. The bear was a fierce, ill-mannered brute—another Chelminsky—while the keeper, who constantly kept him in check lest

he should get himself into trouble by his stupidity and ruthlessness, was Mazeppa.'

'Did the bear, then, fall upon those of the crowd who baited or laughed at him?' said I, feigning a coolness which I did not feel.

'When he showed signs of doing so, for the fool did not know that any one of the bystanders could have smashed his head with an axe. Mazeppa—I should say the keeper—interfered and pulled at the chain which was fastened to the nose of the rash and foolish beast.'

'One day,' I said, 'that bear will show that he is not for ever to be baited with impunity; he will fall upon some fool that is taunting him, and maybe his keeper will not prevent him from teaching his enemies a lesson.'

'That would be an unfortunate day for both bear and keeper,' laughed Zofsky, 'for they would gain nothing better than broken heads.'

'Let us play at bear and bystander!' said I, and in spite of Mazeppa, who cried, 'Hush, Chelminsky,' and of the others, who stepped forward to interfere, I administered a couple of quick buffets, one on Zofsky's right cheek and the other on his left, and in a moment all five of our swords flew out of their scabbards, and there was promise of a good battle—three Poles to us two Cossacks.

The battle actually began.

Zofsky, red in the face and furious, sprang towards me, and our swords clashed. Mazeppa, with his left arm, pressed me gently backwards until I stood beside him, back to the wall, I defending myself, meanwhile, against Zofsky's onslaught.

'Against odds,' Mazeppa said, 'it is better to have no one behind us, and especially,' he added, glancing at our three opponents, 'when we have Poles for adversaries.'

At this the three sprang angrily upon us, and for a minute or two there was quite a din of clashing swords, so that we did not know that the door of the King's cabinet had opened and the King himself had entered the ante-room.

His stern voice was heard quickly enough, and with lightning speed our weapons found scabbards, and we stood, all five, with hanging heads and flushed faces.

For a moment the King was silent. Doubtless he looked sternly upon each one of us, but I think not an eye was raised to meet his. Certainly my own gazed only upon the toe of my shoe.

'I am amazed!' said the King, very distinctly. 'Are you, gentlemen, in ignorance of the King's commands in respect to quarrelling?'

No one replied.

'Speak you, Vladimirsky,' said the King.

'Pardon, Majesty,' said Vladimirsky, 'I have not the plea of ignorance.'

'And you, Zofsky?'

'I was struck first, Majesty,' said Zofsky; 'my anger carried me away: I am guilty.'

'Struck? Within the precincts of my Court? And by whom?' thundered the King.

'By me, Majesty,' I said, 'whom he first insulted in a manner which it was impossible to tolerate!'

'Impossible? And yet it is possible to disobey the King's command! What say you, Mazeppa?'

'We were attacked, Majesty,' said Mazeppa; 'it is the instinct of our race to stand by one another. I could not see Chelminsky cut to pieces before my eyes.'

'Indeed,' said the King, very sternly; 'if that be so, go fight one another's battles where you will for the future. I will have no spitfires in my Court; go, both of you, whence you came. Let me see your faces no more. As for you others, your case shall be considered.'

Then Zofsky behaved in a manner I should not have expected, for he stood forth and boldly told the King that it might be he and Vladimirsky were more to blame in this matter than we, since

they had, indeed, provoked us in a manner that no honourable man could tolerate. But the honest fellow did no service to his cause, for the King flew into a passion and chased from his Court both Zofsky and Vladimirsky, who might otherwise have been forgiven as well as our two selves, so that of his five pages only one remained to him. What became of these young Poles I have never heard and have never inquired; enough that the career of Mazeppa and myself was ended in so far as concerned the Court of Poland. We retired into Volhynia with hearts abashed and heavy, somewhat sullen, and much depressed in spirit, for both of us were ambitious, and indeed it seemed as though our prospects were irretrievably ruined.

CHAPTER II

After our dismissal from the Polish Court we returned for a while to our own homes, where we should have seen little of one another but for the circumstance that we happened to fall in love—if the mild passion of a youth of seventeen can be called by that name—with the same lady, an attractive person of mature age, in comparison with our own, and withal the wife of another, a neighbour, Falbofsky.

It became our delight—an unworthy pastime, indeed—to compete for the favour of this lady, and this foolish competition was the first beginning of the state of constant rivalry in which we two have since passed our lives.

Probably, but for the desire to outdo one another, neither of us would have thought seriously of the matter. I am sure, looking back through the years that have passed, that I was never in love with Falbofsky's wife, and Mazeppa has many times assured me that his attentions to the lady were prompted by that necessity for some

kind of amusement or pastime which every idle youth must experience. But though both denied afterwards that love impelled us to the lady's side, I think we were both at the time seriously determined to get the better of one another in her affections ; and I remember that each boasted continually of the progress and success of his pursuit of the fair one, who smiled, I dare say, impartially upon both of us, pleased with the attentions of each, though not disposed to reward either with any but the cheapest favours.

The matter ended somewhat abruptly, and indeed seriously enough for all parties concerned.

Falbofsky was a Polish noble. We had seen him occasionally at the King's Court, where, being our senior, he had taken but little notice of us. We did not like him, and our visits to his wife were generally undertaken when we knew that he was away from home, at Court or elsewhere.

The lady would inform us whenever these absences were to take place, when Mazeppa or I would be sure to appear, and sometimes both of us together, in order to lighten for her the creeping hours of separation from her husband.

I know not whether someone played us false, some messenger or servant at Falbofsky's house, but it is certain that one day Falbofsky got wind

of our habit of profiting by his absence, for he played us a pretty trick.

We each received, as usual, intimation that Madame would receive visitors upon a certain day and at a certain hour, and as usual, too, both Mazeppa and I strained every nerve to get the better of one another by arriving first, in order to enjoy the society of the lady for awhile before the other should come to destroy the delights of undisturbed possession. On this occasion I had the advantage of Mazeppa, it appeared, being half an hour in advance of my rival, a fact which I discovered by falling first into the ambush prepared for us by the angry husband, who, having smelt a rat or having received warning, lay in wait for us at a lonely spot in the forest, accompanied by half a dozen stout retainers.

A couple of these pounced out from their hiding-place before I had realised that I was attacked, and seized my reins.

I imagined that I had to do with robbers, and hit out so lustily with my fist that one of my fellows dropped the bridle and fell. But others rushed out and pulled me from the saddle. My horse galloped away, leaving me in their hands. Then I realised that I had to do with Falbofsky.

'Gag him,' he said, 'and tie him to a tree

meanwhile, lest he make a noise and warn the other rascal.'

'So Mazeppa is still expected,' I thought. It would be like his cunning, however, if he should have obtained information of this ambush and had stayed away, or maybe gone round by a longer road. Mazeppa was ever the most subtle of mortal men—a very fox, indeed.

'Falbofsky, let us fight it out like men,' I said. He took no notice of my words.

'Do you hear?' he repeated. 'Gag him, and tie him to a tree; his fool of a horse has run away, or——'

I knew not what he was going to say, though, knowing what I now know, I have no doubt he intended to treat me as he presently treated Mazeppa. Thanks to my good horse, who was cleverer than I, and escaped, he was unable to have his will. I interrupted him.

'Are you afraid to cross swords, Falbofsky? I will fight you for your wife, come!'

He took no more notice of this foolish speech than of the other.

'Gag him quickly, fools!' he said, stamping his foot; 'if he shows fight tap him, one of you, on the head.'

Then four of them fell upon me, and in spite of my struggling overbore me and fastened

a band tightly about my mouth. Then they tied me to a tree, and sat about waiting and watching, as they had waited and watched for me.

Presently came the sound of galloping hoofs. Mazeppa rode quickly, anxious, like me, to obtain the lady's ear before his rival should have arrived.

'He comes,' said Falbofsky; 'be ready all, and this time secure the horse, or by thunder you shall be sorry, every one of you!'

Nearer came Mazeppa: the galloping hoofs approached very close, they were almost upon us. Oh, that I could cry out and warn him! but I was as dumb as the dead.

'Now!' whispered Falbofsky, 'two, and then immediately other two!'

At the word out darted a pair of fellows and seized Mazeppa's reins as they had seized mine. The horse reared up in sudden terror. Mazeppa struck at his assailants, but missed; he tried to draw his sword, but a second pair of fellows had pinned his arms and quickly pulled him from the saddle.

Mazeppa lay and struggled, moving this way and that with a heap of men atop of him. Now he showed a head, now an arm, and all the while he cursed and threatened; but the fight was unequal—as I knew to my cost—and presently he was exhausted and lay still.

All the while he had not seen me, nor yet Falbofsky, so that he did not yet understand how matters stood.

'If it is a matter of ransom,' he panted, and then paused open-mouthed, for his eyes fell upon me. His hand stole towards his sword hilt, but they had deprived him of the weapon. Then he recognised Falbofsky.

'Oh, is it so then?' he said. 'What is the meaning of this outrage, Falbofsky? Have you and your crew turned highway robbers?'

'Bind his wrists behind his back,' said Falbofsky, ignoring Mazeppa's words. His men obeyed, Mazeppa resisting, but uselessly.

'Now,' continued Falbofsky, 'strip him; leave him not a vestige of his garments; strip the horse also of his saddle and cloth. Take one of the ropes you have brought and tie the fool tightly to the horse's back. Lay him along, so, and pass the rope round the middle of both. Now remove the bridle, and let them go. Lord, what a thin poor creature thou art, Mazeppa! The folks in the villages will mistake thy lean naked body for a pine-stem!'

Mazeppa was too dazed to reply, he seemed bereft of speech. The men had meanwhile slipped the bridle from his horse's neck. One of them gave a shout to startle the animal, and

another, snatching a stick, smote it violently upon the quarters. Away dashed the frightened creature.

For a moment or two the fleeting hoof-steps were audible as it dashed, mad with surprise and terror, through the forest : a wild curse or shriek from the throat of Mazeppa came back faintly from the distance, then horse and man had disappeared from sight and sound.

Now came my turn.

'Strip him, too,' said Falbofsky, 'and leave him gagged in the road.'

If looks could kill, mine would, I think, have slain my enemy at that moment, but he avoided my gaze and took no further notice of me. He mounted a horse which was brought him from a distance, where it had remained in hiding, and rode away.

Me they stripped of all but a thin shirt. He whom I had knocked down when he held my bridle came up when his master had gone, and belaboured me with a stick, adding many curses. The rest laughed and applauded, making insulting remarks and treating me roughly and brutally as they dragged me into the road, gagged and naked, and there left me.

A peasant found me an hour later as he passed with his cart of hay. He released me,

covered me with a cloth, and drove me to my house. Here I lost little time. Fortunately, I had succeeded in gaining the house unseen, for it was the dinner hour and the servants were busy with their meal. I dressed myself quickly, took my sword, mounted my best horse, and dashed away towards the Falbofsky mansion, distant but two leagues from our own.

My horse knew the road well, for he had borne me many times by the same route. But love had never caused me to drive him so wildly forward as did now the madness of hate and the desire for revenge. My madness seemed to infect him. His hoofs spurned the earth as we flew through air. Within half an hour I stood in the presence of Falbofsky, who sat with his wife talking and laughing, and I doubt not telling her the story of how he had served the two fools who had loved to hang at her apron strings.

She cried out when she saw me. She was accustomed to see me look differently.

'Chelminsky!' she exclaimed in terror; 'your eyes are full of murder.'

'My heart also,' I said. 'Draw, Falbofsky. This time you must fight, whether you will or no!'

'Oh, I am ready,' he laughed, drawing his

weapon, 'if you must needs have another lesson!'

We crossed swords, and I was conscious of our fair Helen rushing from the room screaming for help. 'I must make haste,' I thought, 'and get this matter finished before they come to interrupt.' We began to fight cautiously.

'While yet you have hearing and understanding,' I said, as our swords touched, 'let me tell you that your wife is innocent of all sin. I would not have you die suspecting her falsely.'

'Die!' he said with an oath. 'Death will not come at your call, my friend; as for my wife, she knows a man from a child as well as I. You have been punished enough for the wrong you have done. Will you go home?'

For answer I fell upon him with vigour. This last insult cut me deeply, wounding my vanity. I would show him what manner of child I was. If I might not wound the heart of a woman, I could at least cut to pieces any man who presumed to offend me!

Falbofsky was, I could see, surprised and alarmed by my skill with the sword. He had begun the fight leisurely, as one reserving his strength. Soon he was fencing with all his art, and fencing well. But this day I would take no denying, and within a few minutes I had him

disarmed and at mercy. I think I should have given him the point without pity, but that his fair wife ran shrieking into the room at the moment, followed by servants, and implored me to spare him.

'Chelminsky, do not slay' she cried. 'Chelminsky, my friend! See, he is wounded already!'

I had not observed this. It was true, however; his sword-arm was soaked with blood.

'Well, I will spare him,' I said, 'since you ask me!' Whereupon I stalked from the room very proudly and happily, for I felt my honour had been amply vindicated.

CHAPTER III

THEN I rode to Mazeppa's house in order to find how he had fared in his ride home. To be sent riding back to one's friends stripped of all clothes and tied like a pack to the horse is a shameful thing, and I intended to have my fun out of Mazeppa. He had striven daily to better me in the matter of the lady whose favour we both desired, and I was not sorry that to-day, at least, I had had the laugh of him. Who had seen him as he came jolting, naked, into the stable yard, I wondered! How he would hate the man or men who saw and released him—I knew Mazeppa well! Those men would not remain long in his service! Sweet Lady of Kazan! to ride naked and bound among one's own servants! A shame indeed!

But to my surprise nothing was known of Mazeppa at his own house.

'And the horse?' I inquired.

The servant smiled. 'It would need a clever horse to rid himself of our master!' he said.

'The Pan is a Cossack, and sticks to his horse like the devil to a weak soul! This day he rides the new horse, indeed—an untried Tartar beast from the Ukraine, bought from a merchant who brings a number for sale each year. But the horse is not foaled that can throw Mazeppa!'

Knowing what I knew, I said nothing, but took a bundle of clothes and some food, and galloped forth in order to take up Mazeppa's track from the spot in which Falbofsky lay in ambush for us.

The ground was soft, and it was easy enough to follow the hoof marks. Falbofsky's men had first well startled the horse by shouting and beating him with sticks, so that he had fled at full gallop, kicking up the grass and earth as he went. A child could have led me upon the scent.

But though I rode ten leagues and more before darkness came to render further tracking impossible I had not yet overtaken Mazeppa, and I was obliged to seek shelter for the night in a village which lay a mile from the cross-country path chosen by the horse, which had avoided passing close to the habitations of man, as though aware that he bore a burden which must not be gazed upon.

Very early in the morning I set out once

more upon my pursuit, and, taking up the track where I left it, was soon in full chase.

And I had scarcely travelled more than two or three leagues when I came upon what at first sight appeared to be Mazeppa lying dead beneath the horse, which was as dead as its rider. He was still tightly bound to the beast, which lay with protruding tongue and glazed eyes starting from their sockets, having—as it seemed—tripped and fallen headlong over the trunk of a tree uprooted by the wind, while galloping through the forest in the darkness.

Now, though I was never sure at this time whether I more loved or hated Mazeppa, the sight of his poor naked body come to so pitiful an end filled me with sorrow, and I dismounted very mournfully in order to disengage him from the carcass of the horse which lay upon him. First I cut the bonds that bound him to the dead beast ; after that I dragged the burden from him, for it lay upon one leg and one side of him, covering his chest, but leaving his head free.

'Poor dead Mazeppa!' I murmured; 'thou hast been ever ready to better me, my friend, but I have loved thee, nevertheless, more than other men that I have known!'

As I freed him from the weight that had oppressed him, Mazeppa seemed to groan ; his

eyelids quivered as though he would come to. I took water and sprinkled his face. Presently he sighed and opened his eyes. He stared dully at me for a minute ; then he seemed to remember and sat up to look around. It was plain that he had not broken his neck, like the poor beast that carried him.

He rose to his feet and examined the dead horse, spurning it with his foot.

'Take these clothes, Mazeppa,' I said ; 'it is a mercy and a marvel that you are not as dead as the beast.'

'Curse him!' said Mazeppa ; 'and doubly, trebly and eternally damned be Falbofsky in this and all worlds! I am shamed and disgraced for ever.'

'No one saw thee except Falbofsky and his men,' I said, thinking to soothe him.

'Curse thee, too, for a fool!' he cried angrily. 'Do not men's tongues wag? All the world will know of it for fifty leagues around!' His jaws shook with the cold, but he seemed to take no heed of it, though he quickly donned the clothes I brought. I gave him food ; but, though he must have been starving, he ate it without thinking what he did ; his thoughts were far away.

'How came you free?' he said suddenly. 'Did you escape them?'

'My horse escaped,' I said, 'or doubtless I should have been treated as you were. As it was, I was left gagged and bound in the wood, stripped also; but a peasant found me and carried me home in his cart. Then I rode across to Falbofsky's house, and——'

'You have not killed him—do not tell me that!' cried Mazeppa, so loudly and furiously that I was startled. 'Dare not to tell me you have killed Falbofsky!'

'I fought him and wounded him, but spared his life,' I said, 'because she——'

'She!' cried Mazeppa, and repeated '*She*,' almost shrieking the word; 'it was *she* that led us into the trap. Do you know that, Chelminsky? How would he have known of our coming but for her? And you spared him because she wept and bade you be merciful——was it so, I say?'

I assented, somewhat shamefaced. Mazeppa's madness made me afraid and ashamed.

'Well, thank God, you spared him!' he laughed, a moment later. 'And you reached home naked?' he ended unexpectedly.

'I was not seen,' I said.

'It is the same as though we were both seen. By this time all is known. We have done with home for ever, my friend, you and I—with home and with all who knew us there. I thought

of this as I rode yesterday. Would you return?'

It had not occurred to me that it would be necessary to depart, as Mazeppa suggested, but now that he pointed it out I realised the whole shame that would attach to us both in this matter if folks should speak of it, as speak they surely would. It would be impossible to live, knowing that people looked askance at us as we passed and told one another of our disgrace. True, I had fought Falbofsky and had the better of him, but that would be forgotten, while the rest remained.

'No,' I said, 'I will not return, or, if I do, only for a short space in order to put my affairs in order with the steward.'

'No; let him come to you, that is my advice. We will abide at Gorelka, which cannot be far from here. I have an idea for our future career (I had time to think yesterday), and from Gorelka we will summon our servants.'

We travelled slowly to Gorelka, which was a small town distant about two leagues from the spot in which I had found Mazeppa. There we lodged at the post station, but when we had eaten and rested an hour Mazeppa said that he would borrow my horse for a day, or maybe two days.

'Whither go you?' I said. 'Homewards, to settle your affairs?'

'Yes, homewards, and to settle my affairs,' he replied grimly.

'If one is to go,' I said, 'it were surely better I, for of the two, Mazeppa, it is you that have been worse treated and will be most spoken of. Both of us will lie under contempt, but you more than I.' I spoke honestly, desiring to spare him the shame of being seen, for I saw plainly that this would be no small matter for him in his present temper.

'Fool!' he retorted. 'Do you not understand that because I have suffered the greater disgrace therefore it is for me to go?'

I did not understand for a moment or two. When his meaning at last occurred to me I said no more, for it would have been as foolish to attempt to stem a mountain torrent as to divert Mazeppa from his purpose at that moment. And presently he took my horse and rode away.

A day and a half I awaited his return at that post station at Gorelka. I guessed what was passing in our own district, and I spent my time musing over this and over the question of my future career. Now that Mazeppa had shown me the matter from his point of vision, I

wondered how I could ever have contemplated living at home after Falbofsky's treatment of us and the disgrace and derision that were bound to follow. Truly this fiend could not have devised a more devilish trick to bring fellow creatures into the contempt of men though he had been Beelzebub himself, the prince of fiends!

Mazeppa returned, and I looked into his eyes, saying nothing. He, too, gazed in mine, but smiled only, keeping silence upon the subject we both thought of. But he was now himself once more, and in excellent temper, from which I inferred that his mission, whatever it might be, had succeeded.

On the following day my servant arrived, and Mazeppa's with him. I had despatched post horses and a messenger to fetch them. They brought terrible news.

Falbofsky had been dragged from his bed at night, it was said, and forced to fight with some desperate stranger, who had left him dead or dying upon the ground and departed. 'It was as well,' said the servant, 'that the Pans Mazeppa and Chelminsky were both here at Gorelka, as could be testified, for otherwise suspicion might have fallen upon either or both, since it was freely spoken of that there had been a quarrel in which all three were involved.'

'And the lady?' I asked, glancing at Mazeppa.

'They say she was beaten with thongs by the same miscreant, and lies raving and accusing,' said the man. 'The Pan Falbofsky was a fierce lord, and had many enemies!'

Not one word did I speak with Mazeppa of this matter. We settled our affairs as well as we could do so by our servants, and having dismissed them lost no further time, but rode direct towards Bastupof, a city of the Cossacks of the Ukraine, in search of a career. It was some time before I heard definitely whether Falbofsky died or lived.

CHAPTER IV

See us now at the headquarters of the Hetman or chief of the Registered Cossacks, by name Doroshenko. These Registered Cossacks are they whose names are entered in the book as adherents of the King of Poland : they are thus distinguished from those others who espouse the cause of the Tsar of Russia. It was Mazeppa who so quickly found a new career for both of us, and that by his amazing assurance ; for he rode straight to the Court of the Hetman (who holds his head, be it remembered, as high as the Polish King himself, though in a measure his vassal), and demanded employment, stating our names and the places we came from, but preserving silence—be sure—upon the reason for our leaving home.

'Which is Chelminsky ?' asked the Hetman, and learning that it was I, 'What, the son of our good captain, under Hmelnisky ?' he asked with interest.

I blushed, and said that so it was.

'Then I say that none have a better right to demand service among us here,' said he, taking me by the hand. 'You shall find a good friend in me, my man,' he added kindly, 'and if you are like your father we shall be glad of you indeed! I do not know your name, Pan Mazeppa, but you seem to be one who goes with his eyes open.'

'You will find that Mazeppa's eyes never shut, Hetman,' I said; 'be wise and take him into your special service. He can do many things besides ride and use a sword, in which common accomplishments he excels.'

'Is he a *gramatny*?' asked the Hetman. 'Can he write and read?'

'I am as much clerk as soldier,' said Mazeppa, 'and I know figures.'

'Come, then, that falls in well for both of us,' said the Hetman, 'for my *peesar* (secretary) died but a week since, and all these fellows—though they are devils to fight and can write well with their swords upon the body of an enemy—can wield a pen no more than ply a needle. You shall be tried, sir, as *peesar*, and you, Chelminsky, shall remain soldier.'

Thus Mazeppa first received employment in the country of which he was destined to be the greatest of all, by virtue of his friendship with

myself—a matter which has given me cause for many reflections and for some laughter. I to have been Mazeppa's godfather in Cossack-land ! and he to have owed his first advancement to me ! Lord ! how oddly things happen in this world.

As young men and leaders, for so we soon became, we did well among our equals at the Hetman's Court, and presently stood high in Doroshenko's favour.

With the ladies Mazeppa was ever popular : fickle and inconstant as water was he, yet having some quality of attractiveness which drew female hearts to him in spite of the fate which—it was to be seen—would surely overtake those who trusted him. It may be that women did not take him seriously, as at this time he certainly did not take them. At any rate, he ever stood well with them. With the men he was not so popular, though, for some reason, they seldom quarrelled with him. When they did so they fared ill, for if it came to swords Mazeppa was as skilful as any, and rarely received so liberally as he gave ; while if matters went before the Hetman, then Mazeppa's tongue easily gained him the victory, however weak his cause, for in craftiness and cleverness he was the superior of all, and it so happened that those who offended him came

invariably to ill either immediately or soon, and either upon one plea or another, so that men began to fear Mazeppa.

Occasionally we differed, he and I; but our quarrels were not serious, for, though I began to know Mazeppa from this time somewhat better than I had known him heretofore, or cared to show even now, yet I was fond of him as my first friend, and he of me.

When Mazeppa was chosen, therefore, as ambassador or secret envoy of the Hetman to the Turk in Constantinople, I was chosen by Mazeppa to accompany him. We bore letters from the Hetman, who wrote, at Ian Casimir's request, suggesting a combined movement of Turk, Pole and Cossack against the Russian Tsar, who grew aggressive.

But it happened that we never reached Constantinople, for before we had been many days travelling we were fallen upon, at evening, by a body of Russian Cossacks, who held us prisoners until we should have been examined by their captain in the morning.

During the night, when our guards slept, Mazeppa nudged me.

'Wake, Chelminsky,' he said, 'and eat this.'

'I am not hungry,' I replied wearily, 'let me sleep.'

'Eat, fool, and talk to-morrow,' he said angrily, holding something out to me. I took it: it was several small scraps of paper.

'What is this jest?' I asked. 'This is not the time for fooling, but for sleeping.'

'It is no jest; this is part of the Hetman's letter, which was concealed in my boot. I have eaten much of it and can swallow no more; eat your share: it must all go, and quickly.'

I swallowed a scrap or two of paper and choked. Mazeppa snatched the rest of the torn letter and thrust it into his long boot. Two soldiers awoke. Mazeppa clapped me upon the back.

'He chokes for want of water!' he said. 'Give us a drink, friend, for the love of Heaven. We are all Cossacks, though we swear by different overlords!'

They gave us water, and Mazeppa drank also. Afterwards, when the fellows were asleep again, I tried to swallow more pieces of the letter, but made but a poor job of it. Mazeppa ate some of it, contriving to swallow better than I had done. I hid the rest in my boot, intending to finish it before daylight, and thought I had done so; but when we were carefully examined at morning for letters or despatches, one small scrap was found in my boot, and upon this scrap were treasonable words which betrayed our mission.

'Oho!' said the Captain; 'so you are envoys to the Turk? We have made our capture, men! Come, you young gamecocks,'—to us—'where is the rest of the letter?'

'Down our throats, most of it,' said Mazeppa, laughing; 'washed down by the water which you kindly provided us withal.'

'Come, reveal: what was in this letter?' said the man. 'You had better disclose, or, who knows? we may rip you up to find the pieces. Which of you swallowed the letter? This one, I'll be sworn, since he is so silent, and seeing, too, that a scrap was found in his boot.' The Captain nodded his head at me.

Mazeppa did not contradict. I have since thought that if it had come to ripping us open in order to secure the letter, I should have been the first and perhaps the only one to suffer. At that time I did not suspect that Mazeppa would have allowed me to be the victim; the suspicion came long afterwards, when I knew more of the man's heart.

The fellows consulted, however, and determined to leave us to digest the letter, whatever it might be.

'It seems a serious matter,' said the Captain; 'and you shall be taken to the Tsar's Court at

Moscow. They have ways there of getting men to reveal what it is desirable to know.'

'Take us to the devil if you will,' laughed Mazeppa. 'The Tsar shall know just as much or just as little as we—who know nothing—can tell him. It is easier to eat a sealed letter than to read it.'

'It is easiest of all to tell what was in it, when the knout is at the back!' laughed the Captain. 'We shall see what will happen, Mr. Boastful.'

And so we were actually carried to Moscow to the Court of the Tsar, and since we were not allowed to ride together, nor to speak a word to one another on the way, I did not know what Mazeppa intended to do, or whether he would reveal or conceal what he knew of the vanished letter, or the object of our mission.

As for me I hoped, and prayed also, that I should be found courageous in the time of trial, and that I should not be forced to betray our trust under the anguish of the knout, which tears the flesh like the claws of a bear.

But in this matter, as in every position of difficulty, Mazeppa, born diplomatist and leader of men, found a way to escape—though not the most honourable. Since this is an honest record, however, and not a story drawn up for my own

glorification or Mazeppa's, I must admit that I was so greatly relieved and delighted by our unhoped-for escape from the knout or other torture, that I thought less of the end attained than of the means employed to attain it!

We were confined separately in Moscow, and I was surprised one day when—together with the jailor—Mazeppa entered my chamber.

'We are free, Chelminsky,' he said. 'Come forth—we are in the Tsar's favour.'

'But how—how and why—we who were his arch enemies, and caught in the act of working for his disadvantage!' I cried, hastening out of my captivity, however, and following him quickly from the house as I spoke.

'The Tsar Alexis is the strong man,' said Mazeppa. 'I was brought before him and spoke with him, and I have discerned that it is so. From this time we are no longer registered vassals of the Pole: we are Russians, my friend, and shall henceforward offer our allegiance to the Tsar.'

'Oh, Mazeppa!' I exclaimed; 'have you turned traitor and betrayed our own kith?'

'Bah! we are all Cossacks: those are not more our kith than these; your own father fought the Poles—why not you?'

'That was for independence, not for the Tsar!' I groaned.

'Well,' said Mazeppa, somewhat disdainfully, 'then refuse to be the Tsar's man. Go back and sit in your prison for a few years, if you prefer it, or in a worse place; taste the knout and die of weariness of your own society and the devil's!'

CHAPTER V

Of course I took part in Mazeppa's perfidy, and shared in its reward, freedom and the favour of the Tsar, and presently profitable employment under another Hetman.

We remained in Moscow a little while, and during that period I heard that the Hetman Doroshenko, our late master, had been attacked in his citadel by a large force of Tsar's Cossacks ; that he had been captured and sent into exile. In that exile he died.

That Mazeppa was guilty of contributing in any way to his capture I will not expressly declare. Let each man think as he will upon such matters.

The Tsar Alexis was greatly impressed by Mazeppa, treating him with marked favour and kindness. He took little notice of me, regarding me as a mere hanger-on or attendant of my companion, and Mazeppa's manner, under the sun of the Tsar's regard, grew different towards me. He spoke to me, from this time,

with condescension and hauteur, rousing my resentment at times almost to quarrelling point, though we always ended in reconciliation.

And when I consider the surprising scheme, which at this time took root and began to grow in Mazeppa's brain—a scheme of ambition and presumption indeed, even though he eventually brought one half of it to pass, I am not surprised that he walked head-in-air.

The Tsar Alexis was, as I say, most gracious towards his new Cossack convert. He saw in him, I doubt not, indications of certain qualities which might be turned to the advantage of the State. Mazeppa was a plant to be watered by Tsarish favour and counsel in order that it might one day grow so great and so strong that it should give support to those who desired to lean upon it. Now I discovered without intent the ambitious ideas of my friend, and this by means of a quarrel with him which ended—instead of in his overthrow or mine—in amazement and surprise on my part so great that the quarrel died in the birth, for simple lack in me either of tongue power or arm power to continue it.

We quarrelled because of his new manner towards me.

'Come, Mazeppa,' I said angrily—some word of mine having been slightingly turned aside by

him—'enough of your new manner. I know nothing in you which should justify this new assumption of superiority over me, unless it be that you are a better traitor.'

'Bah! traitor!' said Mazeppa with scorn. 'Must you for ever be a fool, Chelminsky? Shall we not do the best for our own country? What matters who is Hetman or whether a man dies, or a hundred men, if we are learning meanwhile what is wisdom and what is folly?'

'I am not a reader of riddles,' said I, 'but this I know and will say, that you shall treat me as an equal, for your equal I am, or it maybe that swords will be drawn, and it shall be shown that you have a superior.'

'See here, Chelminsky,' said Mazeppa in his friendliest manner; 'put up your sword, or rather do not dream of drawing it against me who am your best friend. You are my equal in most things, I admit, and maybe my superior in some. But in one matter, at any rate, I have you at advantage, for my eyes see further than yours into the coming time, which, I must tell you, if we so desire it, shall be pregnant with good things for us: for you and me that is, and through us for the Cossack nation.'

'Oh, indeed!' I laughed; 'forgive me for

my ignorance; I knew thee not for a prophet until this day!'

'Prophecy goes mainly by the gathering and the placing together of little atoms of knowledge. When one has collected together a pile of such atoms he may stand upon the top and prophesy. Now I know that the Tsar has—for no merit of my own, but because he sees in me an instrument—I know, I say, that the Tsar has set a favourable eye upon me. I know also that Russia is large and full of latent force, but that Poland is small and proud and disinclined to make profitable bargains with our people. She is afraid of Russia. She has just applied to the Turk for aid against the Tsar. We should know that! but the Moslems are not to be trusted: see how they cheated the Poles in the wars of Hmelnisky and your father! As men have been they shall be; they will cheat again. Russia is the strong man armed and the best friend for us, by which I mean that with her we may make the best bargain. Now the Tsar desires that I—and of course yourself—shall return as Russian Cossacks. Samoilovitch is the Russian Hetman, and to his service we shall go. Can you now prophesy with me, or shall I say more?'

'I do not see that we are any farther advanced than when we began to speak,' said I. 'We

have, very treacherously, exchanged our allegiance from Pole to Russian; that I knew before. What else have you shown that I know not? You are a poor prophet so far, Mazeppa.'

'Well, then, I will show more. The Tsar somewhat distrusts Samoilovitch. In any case the Hetman cannot live—or govern—for ever. One day, sooner or later—it may be sooner than one supposes—there will be required a new Hetman, and he will be a nominee of the Tsar.'

'But he will not be a foolish, callow youth of thy age,' I said, laughing scornfully. 'Is this thy prophecy? Be sure, my friend, the next Hetman will not be named Mazeppa!'

'Either that or Chelminsky,' he replied, quite seriously. 'That will depend. Mark you, there is no need of haste in these changes. In five years, in ten maybe, we shall be so much older and wiser. The Tsar, be assured, does not speak so directly of these matters as I now speak with you, but he allows his meaning to appear. As confidential secretary to Samoilovitch I shall soon learn much, says the Tsar, that it is important for him to know. The Tsar values the friendship and the allegiance of the Cossacks. They might, at emergency, bring him fifty thousand lances, or more. He would have me sit and watch and bide my time. It was the

Tsar who said the Hetman cannot live for ever.'

All this certainly gave colour to Mazeppa's hints. The surprise of the communication took my breath away. I had never so much as dreamed of the possibility of Mazeppa attaining one day to the Hetmanship of the Cossacks, nor had I cherished so foolish an ambition for myself: the idea of such a thing had never occurred to me. I sat and gazed at Mazeppa, too amazed to speak.

'I see that I have surprised you,' he said. 'I have thought very deeply upon this matter, and I have persuaded myself that from the Tsar's point of view I may indeed become a useful instrument for his ends. Kings are not guided by philanthropy in their imperial schemes, but by expediency. In me Alexis sees an agent suited, as he thinks, for his purposes; therefore he will employ me. I take no credit, excepting that I have discerned as quickly as he has discerned that there is a kernel to the Cossack nut, and that it may be cracked by teeth that seem weak.'

'I wager,' said I, 'that in this matter the Tsar did not mention my name, though you mention it!'

'Well, he did not,' said Mazeppa. 'He cannot

deal in such matters with more than one. He would scarcely say, "One of you two, whichever prove the worthier, shall serve me in this matter and be rewarded in such and such a manner." The Tsar speaks by hints, mentioning no names. I think I do not lack in friendliness towards you, my friend, in confiding all this to you. You shall go with me to Samoilovitch, and under him we shall rise side by side ; which shall rise the higher in the end matters little so long as the two highest places are ours ! '

In short, Mazeppa easily talked me over to his views, rousing my ambition and quieting my compunctions in the matter of the transfer of allegiance from Pole to Russian.

And I was duly presented to the Tsar, who spoke kindly and regarded me with interest, as though Mazeppa had said good words for me, which, as a matter of fact, Mazeppa declared that he had done.

And at the Court of Alexis Romanof we lived for a month, learning many things concerning Russian life and customs, and here I soon perceived that Mazeppa's ambitions did not end where his first homily had ended.

There was a young princess, by name Sophia, whose heart seemed of the softest. This was the daughter of the Tsar, young and moderately

fair—so it was said, though I did not see her at this time, for she lived in great seclusion, as became, according to the traditions of the Russian Court, the daughters of the House-Royal. But Mazeppa—to my amazement—informed me that he had seen her, not once, but many times.

'In the name of Heaven, how and why and when were you so favoured?' asked I.

'As to *how*, first, then,' Mazeppa laughed. 'The god of love has fought for me; one of the maidens of the Court is very friendly with me. I have walked many times in the garden at Preobrajensky with her, and there the Princess sometimes takes the air. As to *when*, I may say that I have been honoured with sight of her Highness six times, and have spoken with her four times. As to *why*—must I tell thee, Chelminsky?'

'As you will,' I laughed. 'Tell me if it pleases you, that the Tsar will beg of his new Hetman the favour of becoming his son-in-law, and——'

Mazeppa interrupted me with a laugh.

'Come, Chelminsky,' he exclaimed, 'you make progress! Do not move too fast! No, the Tsar knows not that we have met. She herself—well, she smiles sweetly and talks shyly—there it ends to-day. But there will be a

to-morrow. A Hetman is a Hetman and the brother of kings. A Hetman of Cossacks might do worse for his people than marry a daughter of the Tsar, and—who knows ?—the Tsar might do worse for his than choose such a son-in-law ! '

CHAPTER VI

I HAD begun, as I say, to understand and to know Mazeppa, and the first fruit of my better knowledge was the determination to be very cautious in my dealings with him, for in spite of his seeming goodwill towards me I began almost unconsciously to distrust him. It was not long before I became persuaded of this, in Mazeppa, that he did nothing and said nothing without careful intent. Which being so, thought I, his friendship towards me cannot be disinterested, and its reason must be discovered.

Thus, after much consideration, I came at length to the conclusion that Mazeppa intended to use me. I was a pawn in his political schemes, to be employed in the accomplishment of his ends. But I must have position and power to be of use to him, and at present I had none. Then I thought of his words: 'We will rise in the world side by side,' and the idea came to me that Mazeppa fixed certain hopes upon my career as a soldier. He intended that I should have

influence among the soldier population, and that that influence should be employed by me, when the time came, for his advantage.

'Well,' thought I, 'I am willing to rise; but whether my influence, if I have it, shall be used to your advantage or my own, friend Mazeppa, shall depend!'

And indeed both Mazeppa and I—perhaps specially recommended to Samoilovitch by the Tsar himself, as to which I knew nothing—prospered amazingly at the Court of the Hetman. Mazeppa, as secretary to Samoilovitch, soon gained his confidence and became very quickly a power—a force more felt than seen and realised, but none the less a force. As for myself, I too was in much favour with the Hetman, and rose rapidly as a soldier of his army.

The Tsar Alexis died, and in a very short while his son Feodor died also, and now Mazeppa was sent to Moscow, at his own suggestion, in order to see how the land lay in the matter of the Romanof succession. I accompanied him by order of the Hetman, who bade me keep an eye upon Mazeppa and report all that he said and did.

I received this order with surprise. Did the Hetman, then, distrust his *peesar*?

We found Moscow in a turmoil, arriving—as it chanced—on the very day when the Streltsi

those hereditary regiments of turbulent busybodies which Ivan the Terrible had raised and armed, marched in revolt upon the palace within the Kremlin, in order to right certain imaginary wrongs.

It had been whispered among these men that the Tsar Feodor had been done to death by the family of Naryshkin, in order that their own relative—young Peter—might succeed. The Tsar Alexis had married a second wife, choosing a daughter of the Naryshkin family, and her brothers—it was said—would be deterred by no crime from placing their nominee, Peter, upon the throne. Some even said that they would go further than this and murder Peter himself in order that one of themselves, as brothers of the Tsaritsa, might usurp the throne. Now between Peter and the succession there stood Ivan, his imbecile half-brother, and it was averred by the Streltsi that the Naryshkins had not only murdered Feodor, but also this Ivan, and it was in the midst of the fury and the madness of their awakening that we reached Moscow. We found the streets full of an excited mob, all surging in the direction of the palace, following and accompanying the Streltsi, who rushed through the midst of the crowd shouting and gesticulating, and turning up the sleeves of their red shirts as they ran with naked swords to the slaughter.

Some cried as they ran that Feodor had been assassinated ; others that Ivan, the helpless, harmless child of fourteen, had been murdered also ; but all shrieked curses upon the Naryshkins and howled for their blood.

Now whether Feodor had been poisoned, as was said, or whether he died a natural death, I know not; but it is certain that neither Ivan nor Peter had been harmed, for the Tsaritsa, in response to the shouts of the Streltsi mob beneath the palace windows, brought out both children upon a balcony and allowed the deputation of the soldiers to climb up and identify them.

But this was not enough for the Streltsi, who had come for blood and must have it. They still shouted for Naryshkins to be thrown out to them, and two of their own generals who strove to appease them were quickly cut in pieces.

Then a search was made for the brothers of the Tsaritsa, the Naryshkins, a number of the Streltsi forcing their way into the palace and searching it throughout. They found and slew two who had taken refuge in the chapel, and—having vented their fury upon them—were satisfied.

But the mob without howled for victims, and by an unfortunate chance both Mazeppa and I, who followed with the mob into the palace square,

came near to supplying food for their insensate rage. For as we stood, or were hustled hither and thither, Mazeppa, nudging my arm, bade me see who stood near us, separated from us, however, by a score, or maybe a hundred, of the crowd. I looked and immediately recognised an old acquaintance, Falbofsky. This was he whom Mazeppa had left for dead some years before at our home in Volhynia—the rogue who had sent him to ride naked through the Ukraine, shaming us both into exile.

'It is Falbofsky,' I said laughing—'an old friend indeed!' I felt no animosity against the man; time had smoothed out the rancour I had felt in the old days. But Mazeppa was, it seemed, of a different temper.

'I hoped I had wiped out our score that night,' he said, looking darkly at the man, 'but the fellow takes two killings to end him. We will see that he does not escape: he is easily followed and marked down!'

Presently Falbofsky turned and observed us, and I could see at once that if Mazeppa had not forgiven his offence, neither had he forgiven Mazeppa's; for he stared and glared furiously at us for a moment. Then, like a fool, he began to shout aloud maledictions and threats, calling us by our names, and continuing, yet more foolishly,

to tell those about him of the escapade of many years ago and of Mazeppa's shameful treatment.

Mazeppa's face grew milk-white with rage. A few Streltsi standing near began to be attracted by the loud voice of Falbofsky.

'What is the matter—have you found a Naryshkin?' they cried, pushing through the crowd towards Falbofsky, who took no notice but talked on, glaring at Mazeppa.

Then I observed Mazeppa behave in a surprising way. He pointed at Falbofsky: 'A Naryshkin!' he shouted. 'If you seek for Naryshkins, there is one, the vilest fox of the litter!'

'Which, which?' cried the Streltsi, struggling up with bloodshot eyes and hands that clutched their naked weapons, ready to strike.

'The old one!' cried Mazeppa, pointing. 'He was on his way to the palace, but got jammed in the crowd.'

In a moment the men fell upon Falbofsky and cut him to pieces. They killed two others standing beside him, lest they should have made a mistake and slain the wrong one. They stuck the three heads upon spear-points and pushed through the mob, screaming that they had sent one or more of the Naryshkin litter to hell.

'Come,' said Mazeppa, 'we will not stay!'

and, sick at heart and shocked, I struggled my way out of the square.

'You devil, Mazeppa!' I said, when I had recovered my breath. 'No murderer is more guilty than you after such a deed!'

'You fool—it was his death or ours!' he replied. 'Could you not discern so much? Let a man but point at another, this day, and speak loudly, and lo! there is found a Naryshkin for the Streltsi to fall upon. In another moment we should have been the victims instead of he.'

'Thank God,' said I, 'that my heart is not for ever full of black vengeance. I had forgotten his offence, and wished him no ill.'

'As to that,' said Mazeppa grimly, 'it is not my way to forget, nor yet to forgive. Moreover, it was I that was put to shame, and not you.'

Thus again did Mazeppa reveal himself. A terrible hater, indeed! Nevertheless, as I have since thought, his quick wit saved us that day from the fate of Falbofsky and of many others mistaken by the Streltsi for Naryshkins.

Wise folks declare that the real secret of the rising of the Streltsi was the rivalry between the two factions represented by the families of the two wives of the Tsar Alexis—the Miloslavskys and the Naryshkins. It is natural that the Miloslavskys, relations of Ivan, the incompetent prince,

and of Sophia, the princess upon whom Mazeppa had set ambitious eyes, should have desired that their own nominee should sit in the highest place, rather than a younger prince of the Naryshkin faction, and it is said that the Miloslavskys it was who aroused the Streltsi, by foolish reports, to wage war upon their rivals and to murder all upon whom they could lay hands that were of Naryshkin blood.

The upshot of the Streltsi rising was, shortly, this : that Ivan and Peter became joint Tsars, in name, under the Regency of Sophia, in whom was vested the real power, the elder Tsar being both sickly and incompetent, and the younger—though a child of spirit and showing promise of character even at this early time—a mere fledgling of ten years.

This was a victory for the Miloslavskys, of course, for Sophia was the daughter of the Tsar Alexis by his first wife, the Miloslavsky princess, and the incompetent Ivan was her full brother.

I saw the princess now for the first time, and was not greatly charmed by her appearance. She was stunted and squat in form, sickly in complexion, and far from attractive in feature and expression. She smiled very kindly upon Mazeppa, who assumed his most winning air. But whatever Mazeppa may have thought or

hoped, it appeared to me that his ambitions in this direction must be doomed to disappointment; for the lady—it seemed to me—was already provided with a lover, one Galitsin, who never left her side and who frowned at Mazeppa's advances as though he would have no poacher upon his domain. Moreover, Mazeppa was as yet as far as ever from the Hetmanship, and what possible chance should he have of securing a Tsar's daughter for bride unless he were already the elected chief of the Cossack tribes? Add to this, that the lady was now Regent, and it will be seen that Mazeppa's chances were slight indeed. I said as much to Mazeppa, who laughed and replied that Galitsin was welcome to the princess.

'I am Galitsin's lover no less than hers!' he said. 'Politically I am deeply in love with both, and there my love ends.'

CHAPTER VII

I HAD several opportunities of seeing the two young Tsars, as well as the Regent, at this time. The contrast between the elder and younger sovereign was almost incredible—Ivan, the elder, a puny, unwholesome, puffy, sickly-looking lad of some fifteen years, timid and inclined to weep when spoken to, glad to retire from the public eye; Peter, the younger, upright, and very tall for his age—he was scarcely more than ten, indeed, but he was already taller than his brother—fearless, dominant, gazing round with the proud and defiant air of the lion, answering boldly and with dignity both to the questions which were addressed to himself and also those to which Ivan should have replied. For when Ivan was addressed he would flush and hesitate and look as though he must presently burst into tears. Then he would glance at his brother, and the child Peter would speak for him, unless indeed the Regent were present, in which case she would reply for both.

The two princes occupied a double throne, which consisted of two chairs separated by a space of a foot or two, which space was covered or veiled by a silken screen, behind which sat and listened, and sometimes prompted, the Regent Sophia.

I soon conversed with the little Tsar Peter, whose frank manner captivated me. Seeing that I was a Cossack officer, he questioned me closely as to the feats of horsemanship for which our tribes are famous, bidding me describe some of these, which, to the best of my power, I did.

'When I am older you shall come up to Moscow and teach me,' he said: 'I shall learn all these tricks of riding. What are the qualities necessary for one who will excel?'

'First, patience in practice, Highness,' said I; 'then suppleness of body, and, chief of all, courage or nerve, and the determination to laugh when you tumble and not to be deterred by a little pain or even a broken bone.'

'Well, you shall show me one day,' said the Prince, 'and afterwards I will decide whether it is worth while to learn.'

Mazeppa was very friendly with both Sophia and her favourite friend and counsellor, Galitsin, one of the ablest men that Russia has yet produced, though a poor general, as we shall soon

learn. Between these three there were held many secret councils, and I have little doubt that Mazeppa at this time arranged many things both to his own satisfaction and to theirs with regard to the future politics of our tribes. He learned his lesson well, indeed, for I know that he was never afterwards in doubt when any point arose for discussion as to the wishes of our suzerain power—Russia.

Mazeppa had resigned his ambitious matrimonial project without, as it seemed, a pang of regret. But, as though to console himself for the sacrifice, he bestowed much time to the society of one who could scarcely have been more different in every respect from the Regent Sophia, a little maiden—daughter of a well-to-do Boyar, one Kurbatof, by a French wife—Vera Kurbatof, who by virtue of her semi-foreign birth was not condemned to the seclusion of the *terem*, or 'woman's department,' in which most maidens of her day were obliged to pass their existence.

Vera was very young and very beautiful, and there is no doubt that Mazeppa soon lost his heart to her, delighting in her society and spending all the time that he could spare in the endeavour to make himself agreeable to her. Vera, it seemed to me, was less fascinated by Mazeppa than he by her, a circumstance which I

was glad to perceive, for throughout our long friendship it has been my habit to pity any lady upon whom Mazeppa is disposed to bestow the illusory boon of his affections. Mazeppa's heart was ever soft and susceptible, and ever inconstant. Woe to every maiden who should listen to the voice of this most fickle of wooers, for his love was a hostage for many tears.

It were wasted time indeed to dwell upon the tale of this as of any other of Mazeppa's excursions in love, but that in this particular matter there is much to be told that concerns others besides himself, for this Vera is to occupy a large space in these records.

And the first intimation I had that there might be more in this than in others of the countless love affairs in which I have seen my friend involved was that one day—shortly before we left Moscow to return to the Ukraine—the Princess Sophia bade me, with a laugh, 'look whereto converge the eyes of thy friend and of another.'

I followed the gaze of the Princess: she was looking at Vera Kurbatof and glanced at Mazeppa. 'That is one pair,' she said; 'now seek for thyself the other.'

I looked round at the roomful of courtiers and others, for there were many present—taking

the oath of allegiance some, and others spectators and officials—but I could see none who seemed to stare, like Mazeppa, at this fair young girl.

'Look higher!' the Princess said, smiling.

Then it occurred to me to glance at the two Tsars, seated upon their twin throne, and to my wonder I perceived that the eyes of Ivan were riveted upon Vera. His pale, puffed face was somewhat flushed and animated—more so than I had yet seen it—and he seemed for once interested and absorbed, instead of listless and weary and worried.

'It will be desirable and most necessary that my brother should one day choose for himself a wife,' said Sophia, 'and in a year, or at most two years, his marriage may be arranged. It would be a matter for which to praise God if he should show any desire to enter the wedded state, and a mercy for which we have scarcely dared to hope.'

Being somewhat slow of wit, especially when in conversation with great people, for at such moments a certain shyness often assails me, I did not at once comprehend why her Highness favoured me with this communication.

'Your friend Mazeppa should be warned,' she continued, 'that he treads on dangerous ground.'

Then I understood, and laughed together with her Highness.

'My friend does not take seriously the affairs of the heart,' I said. 'In two days he will leave Moscow, and in three he will forget that he has seen this lady.'

'And she? That is also important. My poor brother should have, if possible, a heart that is untainted. Mazeppa is a handsome man.'

'As to that, Highness,' I said, 'I cannot judge, for I have neither spoken to Mazeppa of the matter nor yet watched it for myself. But at any rate I will warn my friend.'

'Do so,' said her Highness, 'but not as from me.'

I did warn Mazeppa, telling him that I had observed the Tsar Ivan look in such a manner at the girl that one might suppose he was attracted by her. Mazeppa laughed much when I told him.

'The youth is one of God's afflicted,' he said. 'There is not life enough in his veins to warm him into admiration for the charms of a maiden. What, would the Regent have Vera marry that dolt? As soon let a maiden mate with a figure of clay.'

'See for yourself how he gazes at her and flushes, even now!' I said.

Mazeppa looked and laughed scornfully.

'Bah!' he said. 'He is gazing at the jewel that hangs at her neck; it moves with her breathing, and he stares at it as a cat would. You are a fool, Chelminsky, to speak of that imbecile and of love in the same breath.'

This was certainly possible, though it appeared to me that the fact was otherwise, and that this unfortunate prince had actually found a face which it pleased him to gaze upon.

'Nevertheless,' I said, 'without doubt they will one day cause this youth to marry someone, for the succession's sake!'

'Then Heaven have pity upon the lady,' he laughed, 'for imagine what it would be for a woman to be mated with a thing no more beautiful and man-like than this, even though they should call him Tsar of Russia! Moreover, my friend, look on this prince and on that—which is the likelier to dominate when both are grown out of leading-strings? Peter is ten times the better man already, ay, and better now than the other will ever be!'

'She is a beautiful girl, however,' I said, 'and it is no wonder that even a half-man, like Ivan, should gaze upon her face with admiration!'

'Oh, I grant that,' said Mazeppa, flushing; 'the best and highest of men might so gaze upon

her and thank his God for the eyes that were given him to see so fair a sight withal!'

'Ha!' I said. 'Mazeppa, that is more than thy usual praise for a woman: is it possible that thou hast it in thy mind to run a race with the Tsar for a pretty wench? That would endanger thy favour with her Highness!'

'Bah!' said Mazeppa. 'I tell you that he gazes at the jewel at her throat because it flashes in the sun: set a light dancing upon the wall, and he will stare at that. As for the girl, it is not my habit to do things in a hurry, and least of all will I marry in haste; but she is certainly one of the fairest of women that I have yet seen! Think you such as she would mate with an Ivan, even though he be half a Tsar? I think she would die first!'

As to that I knew nothing, for I did not pretend to understand the heart of woman. But I knew this, that Russian Tsars marry whom they will, be they devils like Ivan the Terrible, or unsightly, unwholesome things like this other Ivan; for either the maidens must, though they would not, or else they consider that the man matters little so long as there is a crown to be worn, and one may call herself Tsaritsa!

I became somewhat friendly with Vera Kurbatof, and before I left Moscow I took occasion to ask her how she liked my friend Mazeppa.

'He is handsome,' she said, 'and has a good manner, and he is cleverer than all these together except Galitsin ; but he is cunning, and I am afraid of him ; also he looks as though he might be treacherous. On the whole, I do not like him ! Yet, if I should ever need such help as the wit or cunning of a man might furnish me withal, I should trust his wit sooner than another's, so long as I knew that he lost nothing by helping me.'

I laughed much at the time over Vera's saying. But afterwards, that is when next Vera's destiny crossed my own, I remembered it, for I had then reason to believe that Mazeppa had somehow compacted with the girl to stand her friend in certain contingencies. And that Mazeppa was one who would never work without pay I knew well !

CHAPTER VIII

About one year from the time of our return to the Hetman's Court after this visit to Moscow, as I reckon it, there began to subsist a state of constant warfare between Mazeppa and myself; not a warfare of thrust and blow, of swords or of pistols, indeed, for we never came to violence, but a warfare of wit, in which the desire to obtain the better of one another was the principal end and motive.

We had been, on the whole, good friends up to this time. I had, indeed, begun very gradually to understand Mazeppa and to regard him, in consequence, with more suspicion and less respect than formerly; but I now soon realised that I must treat him differently, that I must in fact dissemble with him, since I found that he dissembled constantly in dealing with myself, if I desired to live upon equal terms with my friend and not to lag for ever behind in the race of life.

That which first angered and set me to use my wits against him was this:

I was sent in command of my thousand of Cossacks upon an expedition, half scouting and half punitive, in connection with the Tartars of Azof, an expedition which, though its results were meagre, occupied half a year. Now, though I have said little about such matters in connection with myself, preferring to regard Mazeppa as the hero of my history and to dwell upon that which concerns him rather than my own affairs, I will now state that there was a maiden at the Court of the Hetman towards whose charms I was not indifferent. I had had many affairs of the heart : we Cossacks never lack for friends of the fair sex, and I may say without boasting that my success in such matters had for ever been satisfactory, and quite on a par with that of Mazeppa himself, who prided himself upon being irresistible.

Now this lady, Olga Panief, was young and proud, and pre-eminent among Cossack maidens for comeliness. There was scarcely one of us who lived within the shadow of the Hetmanate who had not, at one time or another, laid siege to her heart, which, however, had never until quite recently capitulated.

Even when, as all supposed, I had at length caused the beleaguered one to lower her flag and permit the entrance of Love the Conqueror, I was not at

all so sure of my conquest as others supposed, and when I went with my Cossacks among the Tartars I rode with an unquiet heart, for I knew for certain two things—the first, that Mazeppa would profit by my absence in order to re-invest the citadel which should be mine by right of conquest ; and the second, that my hold upon the fair Olga was not so secure but that she might even now lend a willing ear to so artful a singer as Mazeppa.

For what actually happened I was by no means prepared.

My first visit on my return was to the house of Panief, the father of fair Olga, and one of the seniors among the Cossack colonels.

But, to my astonishment, the Panief mansion was closed, and the family, evidently, were out of town.

Then I went to Mazeppa, for my thoughts and suspicions turned as naturally to him as a man would look up at the clouds when rain fell.

On the way to Mazeppa's house I met Sotsky, of whom I inquired what had become of the Paniefs.

'Oh, that is a little bit of our friend Mazeppa's handiwork,' he laughed. 'Mazeppa took advantage of the absence of someone to lay violent siege in a certain quarter. He had no success, and this is the result.'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'Where are the Paniefs? What can Mazeppa have to do with their disappearance?'

'Oh, ask Mazeppa himself; it is not my business!' Sotsky laughed, and he went upon his way without further explanation.

Sotsky's words and manner entirely puzzled me, and I scarcely knew how to approach Mazeppa, whether with sword in hand and accusations in mouth or as one who knows nothing.

Of what, indeed, could I accuse him?

Mazeppa betrayed no agitation. 'He will play the fox,' thought I, and I determined that I too would act both cautiously and with cunning equal to his own. But Mazeppa was frank, and disarmed me at once.

'Your first question will be "Where is Olga?"' he said, laughing. 'And my answer is prepared, "She is in Moscow!"'

'In Moscow!' I replied, astonished. 'What does she there?'

'I do not wonder that you are surprised. If you had visited a dozen other houses in which dwell maidens of rank and good appearance, you would have found them also deserted, like the Paniefs'. During your absence there came a messenger from the Grand Duchess, the Regent.

Do you remember when we were last in Moscow that you played the prophet and declared how one day they would cause the Tsar Ivan to take a wife? You were right, and I—who laughed the idea to scorn—was wrong. The word has gone out for the maidens to assemble in Moscow for the Tsar's inspection.'

'And to whom,' I asked angrily, 'was the selection entrusted in this district? To you, Mazeppa, I'll be bound!'

'You may see the letter of her Highness,' said Mazeppa, producing the document and handing it to me. 'If you are angry that Olga Panief was sent, you are wrong; for go she would, whether you or I willed it or willed it not!'

'I think that is a lie, Mazeppa,' I said fiercely. 'I will tell you what has happened. In my absence you have sought to reap in my field, but Olga would have none of you, and in return you have included her name with those from among whom the Tsar is to make his choice.'

'Not so,' said Mazeppa; 'you are angry and make unjust accusations. Olga, as I have said, was determined to go; she would take her chance like the rest, she declared, and when I said, "What of Chelminsky, Olga?" she replied

that both Chelminsky and I and any other Cossack lover might go hang if the Tsar would have her, even a Tsar that spluttered when he spoke and played with a child's toys. I swear that what I say is true. Go to Moscow and see for yourself, if you will.'

Knowing Olga as I did, I was aware that it might well be as Mazeppa said.

'It would serve the minx right,' I replied angrily, 'if the Tsar should choose her; but of that there is little chance, for I think his choice is already made, and this assembling of the maidens is a formality, a concession to ancient customs, and no more.'

Mazeppa winced at this, by which I knew that he had not yet forgotten his infatuation for Vera Kurbatof.

'I know not to what choice of the Tsar's you refer,' he said. 'They would scarcely assemble the maidens if it were as you say.'

'If, as you admit, I was a good prophet on one occasion, why should I not prove all a prophet, and not only half?' I laughed. 'You remember well enough that I bade you see how the Tsar watched the face of Vera Kurbatof; be sure that his choice began and will end with her, even though a Mazeppa should woo in rivalry.'

'I think not,' said Mazeppa. 'She would

never—— ;' he paused, and paced the floor awhile in thought.

I read the Regent's letter : it was short, and merely made known that it had been decreed that the elder Tsar should take a wife. Maidens of the desired age — about seventeen — would assemble at the Kremlin Palace by the day fixed for their arrival, and those agents appointed in the various districts would be answerable for the despatch of all such maidens, of suitable rank and age, as were to be found in their locality. Mazeppa, being known to her Highness, was by her appointed agent for the Ukraine towns and district.

'You have acted unfriendly, Mazeppa,' I said. 'You should have reflected that being, in a measure, affianced to myself, Olga might be exempted from this formality. The power is in your hands to send or to exempt a maiden.'

'I tell you, my friend, that the girl would take no denial : she would go. She spoke of you and of me in a breath, declaring that neither for your sake nor for mine would she surrender so great a chance of advancement. "I am no more Chelminsky's than yours "—those were her words —" and I hope to heaven that I shall be neither his nor yours, but the Tsar's ! "'

'I know not whether to believe you or not,' I

said, and Mazeppa replied with a laugh that in that case I had better go to Moscow and ask the lady for myself. 'She is a saucy minx,' he said, 'and will not withhold the truth to save your feelings. As the agent of her Highness in this matter I am bound to be in Moscow on the day appointed, in order to see that the maidens from my district are duly assembled. The day appointed is but a week hence : travel with me if you will. I shall be glad of your company, and perhaps also of your assistance in——"

Mazeppa did not finish his speech, but relapsed into thoughtful silence. I did not think twice upon his broken sentence, imagining that he meant he would need help in collecting and marshalling the army of Cossack maidens, which would be his duty.

As for me, I felt aggrieved and angry that Olga Panief should have spoken and acted thus. I suppose my love for the girl could have been no more strong or real than hers for myself, however, for certainly I was more offended than heart-broken ; and if any one feeling predominated in my mind over the rest it was an ardent hope that she might be disappointed of her ambition, and that the Tsar would not so much as glance at her.

Nevertheless, I determined to travel to Moscow with Mazeppa. The ceremony of

choosing a bride for the Tsar—and especially such a Tsar as this one—must be of overwhelming interest. Moreover, I felt certain that the Tsar would choose Vera Kurbatof, and I was curious to see what would then happen ; what Vera would do or say, and what Mazeppa would do. I even found out now, for the first time, that I myself began to feel a strange interest in this girl, and in the crisis which might now be before her.

CHAPTER IX

MEANWHILE a significant thing happened with regard to her who was generally believed to be as good as chosen beforehand to be Tsaritsa.

A sight to make angels weep and devils smile was it, men said, when Vera Kurbatof—before the great choosing, and I think before the assemblage even of the maidens—was summoned to the palace in order that the bridegroom Tsar (forsooth !) might first see her at his leisure and without the excitement of a throng around him.

There were two or three other maidens besides Vera who were thus, like her, subjected to a preliminary and private inspection by Ivan. These were the daughters of Boyars whose position at Court brought them constantly into the presence of the Tsar, and whom he therefore knew well and could meet and speak to without overmuch timidity and shyness. These Boyars, by Sophia's decree, should have the first chance for their daughters ; for it was hoped that Ivan

might more readily take a fancy to the child of one whom he already knew than to some stranger.

'He will never take a fancy,' some said, laughing, 'for there is nothing of a man in him.'

But others declared that he had gazed twice at this maiden or that, and some knew—among whom was I—that his eyes had rested in a peculiar manner upon the face of Vera on a certain occasion—in a manner, indeed, which would seem to indicate more of the man in Ivan that some believed to exist.

The question was, did he remember his old-time fancy for her face, or was it so passing and passionless a sentiment that he had forgotten it during the score of months that had gone by since that day on which I had observed it?

I have heard from those who were present that his most gracious and most unmanlike Highness took no notice whatever of the daughters of those faithful Boyars who lived about the Court, excepting to curse this one and strike and spit at that one, and to burst into tears and upbraid his sister when brought in to see and consider a third.

But the interview with Vera was a different matter and a thing to be spoken of by itself. Here is a description of her visit, as told to me

by one who saw it with his own eyes!—a scene, as I have said, to make angels weep!

Vera was sent for without notice and without information as to the object of her visit.

'I have sent for you, child,' said the Regent very kindly, 'because I am favourably impressed by your appearance: you are certainly as fair as any of the maidens yet arrived, and it is possible that a great, a supreme honour may be in store for you.'

Vera hung her head, abashed: she would have renounced all claim to the honour implied, but she durst not.

'I see you are overcome by the thought of this greatness,' continued Sophia, taking the girl's hand and patting it within her own. 'Take heart, child, for indeed you would make as fair a Tsaritsa as we could wish to see.'

'Oh, I dare not, I cannot, Highness,' murmured poor Vera. 'I am not the stuff of which Tsaritsas should be made: I have no ambition.'

'Then begin now to take a larger view of life. Listen, it has been whispered me that his Highness my brother looks kindlier upon you than upon any other maiden that he has yet seen: there, sweet one, does not that awaken thy slumbering fancy? He is a great king—remember this—though, to say truth, but an afflicted youth.

Do not lose sight of the greater issue by foolishly magnifying the lesser. The Tsar is the Tsar, whether he be lusty or afflicted; a handsome youth or, by the will of God, a pale invalid. Tell me, are you great enough to love the Tsar for his greatness, which you would share as Tsaritsa?'

Vera hung her head and remained silent.

'Speak, girl!' said Sophia, a little less kindly than before.

'Madam, having seen so little of the Tsar and—and oh, Madam, how should I love him? I revere him, as Tsar and head of the Boyars, but to love is different.'

'Well, well, fool; in order to marry wisely it is not always necessary to love. Love yourself, that is the first thing; if you truly love yourself you should seek your own good: is not that fair logic? What better thing can a maiden have than to be chosen Tsaritsa? I say there is no better destiny for a maiden under Heaven!'

'To love and to be loved is the best, Madam, for some,' said Vera, hesitating.

'Tut, fool!—love does not wear for long. A high position and power—these are the lasting blessings, and they carry love with them—yes, and every other good thing besides. Moreover, if to love and to be loved is for you the be-all

and end-all, let him love you, for his part, say I ; and as for you—if you cannot love him, love whom you will ! '

' Madam ! ' exclaimed Vera, and was about to say I know not what indiscreet thing, when the laughter of the two or three who were present, in which Sophia herself joined, interrupted her. Vera flushed deeply, but remained silent.

' Well, child, speak,' said the Regent ; ' why are you dumb ? '

' I have nothing to say, Highness. I have been used to see things otherwise than as your Highness would now teach me ! '

' The way of wisdom, little fool, is to accept thankfully the gifts which the gods provide,' said Sophia, ' whether it be a lover or position or anything else that is good. Here you have greatness offered you : that is, it might be offered you if you should play your cards wisely ; also love, of a kind ! ' she ended with a quick glance at Galitsin and the others.

Galitsin laughed aloud, but turned aside to hide it.

' I wish for neither, Madam,' said Vera boldly.

' Well, Lord bless us, little fool ! ' exclaimed Sophia, waxing impatient. ' We are all subjects, both you and I and all of us, and as such bound

to obey the Tsar whether we will or not : you admit that much, I doubt not. What if the Tsar desires thee—is he not to be obeyed because thou art a fool ? Dear Saints ! beware what you do, girl ! To stand against the Tsar himself and to resist his will is the worst of all foolishness ! '

'Madam, have pity ! ' said Vera, falling on her knees.

The Regent bustled her quickly to her feet. 'I,' she exclaimed, 'what have I to do with the matter ? It is not I that choose a bride, but the Tsar. If he choose thee, it is thou that art greatly honoured, not I ! Stand upon thy feet, and shame not thyself before these men. Send for the Tsar, Galitsin, and let us have this comedy played and done with.' Poor Vera fell a second time to her knees.

'Madam, he will not make his choice here and now ? You would not permit it—he must see all—there are many fairer than I and more fitted to be Tsaritsa——Oh, do not let him come near me now ! '

'Peace, raver, and let me speak ! ' replied Sophia grimly. 'His Highness will not make his final choice here and now ; but he shall see thee because it is said that he has shown a preference for thee. It is necessary that he take a wife, understand it or understand it not ; it is neces-

sary for the dynasty. Very well, if he will choose for himself, so much the better for all parties ; if he will not, so much the worse ; but in any case he will marry, and, if necessary, the choosing shall be done for him.'

Then in came Galitsin, and with him—angry to be disturbed, and asking querulously the reason —Ivan the Tsar. The Prince was in full speech when he entered the room, but when his eye fell upon Vera he became suddenly silent. He gazed at her fixedly for a moment, opening his mouth and shutting it again. Then he turned to his sister.

'Why have you sent for me ? it is not a reception,' he said. 'I will not see strangers without Peter ; Peter is not here.' Then his eyes sought Vera's face once more and remained fixed there.

'There are no strangers, Ivashka,' said Sophia ; 'and there is no reception ; only this beautiful maiden is come to show thee how fair she is—look well at her.'

'She is fair enough,' said Ivan ; 'but I care for no woman. I will not marry, Sophia ; do not worry me.'

'Ah, but how different is this one from the rest, only see, Ivashka—what eyes, what hair ! had ever maiden such a form ?—mark it well ! She should sit at thy side when foreigners come,

and should speak to them instead of thee! A fair thing to have for ever about one! Happy the man who may, if he will, possess her to gaze upon and to fondle for his own. Come, take her hand, Ivashka, and kiss it. She shall be thine own if thou wilt have her.'

The Tsar's face had flushed during this speech. At the end of it he actually took the girl's hand in his own, smiling in her face, or leering, as perhaps it might more accurately be called. He even began to raise her fingers as though to bring them to his lips, but at his touch Vera paled, staggered, and would have fallen fainting to the ground or into the Tsar's arms, but that Galitsin caught her and laid her senseless form upon a divan.

'See!' said Sophia triumphantly: 'she is overcome, brother, by the honour and the happiness thou hast done her in thus noticing her beauty above the others. Thou hast chosen well, my soul——'

'I have not chosen her—I have not, I say,' cried Ivan, stamping his foot and turning upon the Regent. 'Why do you speak foolishness? I want no woman. She is afraid of me; do you think I do not see it? She might have suited, if I must marry, but she is afraid of me and hates me.'

'Not so, not so, brother: only think, for a maiden to be chosen Tsaritsa is no small thing; no wonder that she has fainted in the sudden joy——'

'Sister, you are sometimes a fool, though generally very wise,' said Ivan. 'Be silent, I say, and speak no more foolishness!' With which words he turned and left the room, glancing back for a moment at Vera lying unconscious upon her divan.

Thereupon Sophia stamped and swore first, and then laughed, while Galitsin only laughed, and the two other witnesses—being courtiers—knew not whether to laugh or to look grave, and so the comedy ended.

A sight indeed to make angels weep!

CHAPTER X

One would suppose that with so comprehensive an order published throughout Russia, namely, that the fairest maidens from every part should be despatched to the city for the convenience of the Tsar in his choice of a bride, the whole of Moscow would be full of young women. And so, doubtless, would it have been but that a wise discretion had been left in the hands of those agents in each district to whom had been entrusted the duty of selecting and despatching the maidens. Not all who would fain have come were permitted to make the journey. Many were first weeded out as unfit before the final few, the very cream and perfection of Russian maidenhood, were despatched to the capital.

Indeed, there were no more than two hundred, in all, that now awaited in the *terem* of the palace in the Kremlin the verdict of the Tsar or of those who would choose for him.

I spoke with many of those who, like Mazeppa, had been entrusted with the duty of

selection. Of these some made very merry over their commission.

'One would suppose that every maiden in my district,' said one, 'was of the age of seventeen, and beautiful, and virtuous, and healthy. I had crowds to deal with and none would take "no" for an answer. Believe me if you will, of the thousand or more that offered themselves from Novgorod, I am here at last with five maidens. I know not how I shall dare return to my home, for I have now nearly one thousand inveterate enemies, ready, I doubt not, to tear me to pieces!'

'How is a man to say this one is beautiful or that one?' said another. 'As for me, I brought all who offered themselves, which was luckily only eight girls, my district being a narrow one. How should I say whom the Grand Duchess might think handsome, and whom plain? It is her affair, not mine; her eyes are the judges.'

'What! is the Tsar to have no word in the choice?' I asked, laughing.

'Lord—as if he could say yea or nay for himself! He would weep and ask to be taken back to his play-room. "I desire none of them," he would say. "Why should I marry any of these strangers?"'

All present laughed at this, but one said:

'It is of the maidens I think. Were I one of them I should pray to God from this moment until the last hour of the choice that the Tsar might choose any one of the maidens rather than myself. Imagine, my brothers, the being mated with such a thing! A Tsar that dribbles at the mouth and chatters to himself, but will speak to no other if he can avoid it. A Tsar that falls in a fit if startled or loudly spoken to; a creature that—if he were not a Tsar—must be laughed at, or wept over; a thing to be hidden from the eyes of his fellows! Yet here is this frolic of nature paraded as though he were a man like another, in order that he may condemn one of God's fairest creatures to the unspeakable horror of marrying him!'

'That is foolish talk, Katkof,' said another. 'These young women come to marry the crown, or the throne, or the sceptre—what you will. What matter who it is that sits arrayed as king? Moreover, what signifies a marriage with such as Ivan? It is to be another nurse, another attendant, and there is the end; only that she will be called Tsaritsa, and will sit higher than every other woman in the land!'

I suppose that both opinions were right and both wrong. Some maidens there be, the majority I doubt not, who would accept all

things if only they might have the title and position of Tsaritsa. A few would pray to God with tears night and day that the Tsar, in making choice, would pass them over. They would grimace, or develop a weary look by keeping awake at nights, or they would cry their noses red and their eyes swollen! Anything to escape so hateful a destiny as to be chosen Tsaritsa to such a Tsar!

Vera Kurbatof was not among those who were obliged to live during the days of selection within the *terem* of the palace. This did not mean that she was exempt from competition: on the contrary, it was told me that she stood at the present moment first in order of probability. That is, the Tsar was supposed to regard her already with favour; and this final assemblage of maidens had been brought about merely in deference to old customs, and in order that it might be seen, before a final decision were made, whether this Vera were really supreme among her peers, or whether there might not possibly come one whose superiority was so marked that even Ivan must observe it.

For the Tsar must have the very best; that was the central idea.

By a lucky chance I happened to meet Vera Kurbatof on the very day after our arrival in

Moscow. She was walking with the old nurse who was ever her companion out of doors, and she was strictly veiled, in the fashion of the time; for until the Tsar Peter afterwards changed this and many other things after his own drastic, autocratic fashion, women in Russia were, like their sisters in Eastern countries, discouraged from showing their faces in public.

I recognised her by her voice, which was a peculiarly sweet one, and as we met I spoke to her, making my profoundest reverence in order to atone for the boldness of addressing her without permission.

'I think you are the *Barishnya* Vera Kurbatof,' I said. 'If I am right, let your voice bear the blame of betraying your incognito.'

She started. 'Yes, I am she!' she said, 'and you—yes—I remember, you are the friend of the Cossack Mazeppa.'

'May I not stand on my own feet as the Cossack Chelminsky?' I said, making a show of laughing, though I felt somewhat aggrieved that she, of all others, should have remembered me not for myself, but in virtue of my connection with Mazeppa.

'Forgive me, sir,' she said, 'I do, indeed, remember both you and your name, but it happened that I was thinking of Mazeppa. I

have thought more than once lately of your friend, for—for a reason.'

'Worse and worse!' I said. 'Now I am jealous, indeed! May I know why Mazeppa is so fortunate as to have been the subject of your thoughts?'

'Forgive me, I am distracted at present; I scarcely know what I am saying. I desire very much to see your friend. I have longed day and night to see him, because—I cannot tell you why, excepting that I am in great trouble and danger and I need his assistance, which he once placed at my disposal.'

'May I not be upon an equality with him by doing the same? All my wit and all my power are at your service. I am sure that I am as ready to serve you as he.'

'I do not doubt it, and—and if it were ordinary service I should accept your offer most gladly, but that which Mazeppa suggested was a particular service and must not be spoken of, excepting to himself.'

'What then would you wish me to do?' I asked, feeling much mortified.

'I would have you tell him that the time has nearly come when he must redeem his promise, if it is ever to be redeemed,' she said. 'Soon it will be too late; the danger I feared, or rather

the danger which I refused to recognise, has proved a real one. It was he that pointed it out, half in jest and half in earnest, but it has come true.'

'I will tell you that the secret is no secret for me!' I laughed. 'The danger you are in is this, that the Tsar Ivan desires to make a Tsaritsa of you and you desire it not. Am I right?'

'Did Mazeppa tell you this?' she asked. 'Oh! did he send any message—that he would come to help me—to do that which he promised in case of imminent danger?'

'Mazeppa gave me no message. As for the Tsar, it was I that showed Mazeppa which way the wind blew, not Mazeppa me. I saw how Ivan gazed at you, and bade Mazeppa look also. He feigned to think nothing of the matter; but I perceive that he thought badly enough of it to warn you and to promise assistance.'

'Alas! what am I to do? Supposing that among these maidens there is none that happens to please his fancy—then I am lost!'

'Think whether I cannot help you as well as Mazeppa, whom, as you told me, you fear or dislike.'

'Hush! do not say that! It was thoughtful and kind of him to foresee danger and to suggest a remedy. I should be ungracious if I accepted

your offer while his own still holds. Is he in Moscow ?'

'He is in Moscow,' I said grimly. 'I will tell him that you expect certain services from him which he promised in case of danger.'

'Yes, tell him that. Do not think me ungrateful, my friend. I am under promise to apply for help to Mazeppa in case of need ; I am none the less grateful to you for your offer.'

'Will not your father take your side in this matter ?'

'Alas ! he regards it from a different standpoint. For him, the crown is the crown, the man nothing. He thinks of the glory that would be mine and his if I were to become Tsaritsa. He glories in the prospect already, for, indeed, many say that the Tsar's mind is made up, and that he will marry me or none. Now you understand how imminent is my need of escape. I would die a hundred times rather than mate with that loathsome thing.'

'Well, I will tell Mazeppa,' I said, feeling strangely mortified and somewhat heavy at heart besides. Vera Kurbatof had drawn me within the hall of her father's house, and we sat before the stove and conversed. The old nurse sat with us, muttering occasionally, and crossing herself.

The old woman followed me as I rose to depart.

'Do nothing she asks you!' she whispered, taking me aside. 'To be Tsaritsa elect, and to desire to escape! Who ever heard such things! Say nothing to Mazeppa of this. Do you know what he has promised her? I will tell you. He will carry her off to the Ukraine and hide her there so that none shall find her again. He is a devil, this Mazeppa; I can see it in his eyes. He would bring her to no good. He is not to be trusted.'

'Maybe you are right, Matushka,' I said. 'I will keep your warning in mind.'

I told Mazeppa, nevertheless, as in duty bound, what Vera had said.

'Aha!' cried Mazeppa, visibly delighted. 'So she remembers, and would have my assistance! Well, she shall have it, tell her. Let her be patient for a few days while we watch how matters go. She shall not be deserted, but I will not go near her at present, lest I should be suspected afterwards!'

CHAPTER XI

It was at this time I first became intimate with a certain young lion cub destined before many years were passed—though few guessed it as yet —to become a very great and uncouth beast, and to startle the world with very loud roarings. Let me draw a picture of the said beast, whose name was Peter Alexeyevitch, the younger son of the Tsar Alexis.

'You shall come and show my fellows how to ride,' he had said to me, and to Preobrajensky I went, little dreaming how curious and suggestive a state of affairs I should find there. At Preobrajensky, but a few miles from Moscow, the younger Tsar lived with his mother, the Tsaritsa Nathalia, whose authority, since the Streltsi insurrection, had declined to zero, having given place to that of the Regent Sophia and her lover, Vassili Galitsin.

In this retreat mother and son lived almost undisturbed by the duties of young Peter's high position, for it was the policy of Sophia to keep

the Tsar in the background, causing him to visit Moscow only on those rare occasions of ceremony when the presence of the nominal heads of the realm was absolutely necessary. Peter was allowed to live as he would—his vices to have free run, his follies to remain unchecked, in the hope that his subjects might thus behold him develop into an unworthy prince, on whose behalf it would be foolish to overturn a better if less legitimate order of things.

And, indeed, there were few at this time who watched the growth of this prince with any particular interest, as of one destined to great things. Whether he himself guessed his own greatness or no I cannot tell, though it is certain that it was possible to gather from an occasional remark from his lips that he was at least awake, and that the present position of politics and its possible development in his favour had not altogether escaped him.

I found him among grooms and cook boys, a motley company of his chosen companions, the base lump being leavened by the presence of a few sons of well-known Boyars. These were one and all members of the 'Pleasure Regiment' which it was Peter's delight at this time to keep and to train: an odd assortment indeed of young moujiks, servants upon the estate, young Boyars

and *dvoryanins*, and every lad with a taste for soldiering or for wild living who had happened to hear of and be attracted by the half-serious, all-boyish activity of the young Tsar at Preobrajensky.

I found him drinking beer among the stable lads and moujiks who formed his chosen circle of friends and officers, and though assuredly Peter Alexeyevitch gave at that time scarcely a hint of the greatness that was in him, being as yet but in his sixteenth or seventeenth year, and with apparently little seriousness of thought about him, yet I felt marvellously attracted by the youth, believing that I saw in him more than I had been taught at Moscow to credit him withal, where it was the fashion to cry him down as a prince of little promise, given to excess of every kind, but possessing no solidity of character, no ambition, no sense of the responsibility of his position and of its duties. 'He is a fool!' Galitsin had said in my hearing, 'a fool with many vices; one who, without the wisdom of the Regent to restrain him, might be a danger to the State.'

As to his personal appearance, this was most striking. Tall beyond belief, lanky, somewhat round in the shoulder, long-armed, dark-haired, large-eyed, round-faced, pleasant in expression

until the moment when some word or action of his companion's or even some thought of his own aroused a feeling of anger, when at once his eyes became harsh and cruel like a savage beast's, and his brow would knit and his mouth scowl. At such a moment too, his head would turn with a spasmodic jerk over his shoulder as though he would look at his heel, and sometimes he would grasp the nearest object with his hands—whether a man or a piece of furniture—as if to steady himself.

During these paroxysms Peter Alexeyevitch was a dangerous neighbour, having little control over himself. I have heard it said at the Russian Court that he is not to be blamed for such attacks, which were the simple result of those scenes of horror and carnage to which he was condemned at the age of ten by the excesses of the Streltsi, when his young feet were dragged by them through the blood of his uncles, his mother's brothers, the Naryshkins, and when he was a personal witness of the murders of Dolgorouki, Matveyeff, and other victims.

For myself I have rarely seen him in a fit of passion, for it happened that he was pleased to take a fancy for me from our first acquaintance, and was ever kind and gracious towards me.

'Sit, Chelminsky, and drink with us,' he

now cried, as I entered the large and dirty barrack room in which the company were assembled. 'You are welcome; brothers, this is the prince of Cossacks, Chelminsky, who shall teach us all to ride presently. Meanwhile, give him the biggest tankard, and stand, all, while he drinks. There is beer and mead, Chelminsky; choose your stuff and drink till you're drunk—it is our rule.'

'Then I must ride before I drink,' I laughed, 'or I shall only teach your fellows how to fall off.'

I was allowed to postpone my drinking upon this plea, for which I must thank the youth of the Tsar, for assuredly but a year or two later, and ever afterwards, he would have listened to no excuse from any whom it pleased him to bid drink with him. To drink with the Tsar meant certain intoxication—for the guest, at least, if not for the Tsar also; but, being liberally gifted by nature in this as in most other respects, Peter was sometimes able to withstand when all around had succumbed. Yet, so robust was he that, however late he may have lingered over his wine cups by night, he was invariably able and ready to begin a long day's work so soon as morning arrived, and to go through with it as no other man in the realm could have done.

I rode for an hour before this motley crew, showing them many Cossack tricks, to the great delight of the Tsar himself and of his companions —such as picking up a sword from the ground while passing at full gallop; vaulting into the saddle as the horse flew round in a circle; standing, kneeling, lying when in full career, and so forth.

Both the Tsar himself and many of his half-drunken companions must needs emulate my performances, one of the fellows breaking an arm and another his head, and the Tsar himself twisting his ankle in a fashion that caused him to walk lamely for several days afterwards. Meanwhile Peter expressed to me his satisfaction after his own manner. He smote me violently upon the shoulder:

'By the saints, Chelminsky, a troop of horsemen like yourself should make themselves felt in a battle; one day, maybe, we shall fight together. Why should I not add fifty Cossacks to this regiment of mine? I will speak with you again of the matter, when I am sober.'

But since the Tsar was far from sober at this time, and for the rest of the day, I had no opportunity to discuss the matter.

But I met young Boutourlin in Moscow a day or two later, and spoke with him. The young Tsar was delighted with me, he said:

'And that may prove a wonderful thing for you, Chelminsky; for, believe me, this lion cub that yawns to-day and plays with bones shall hunt for himself to-morrow; and those who are his playmates now will presently become his princes and ministers.'

'What! these grooms and moujiks?' I laughed.

But Boutourlin wagged his head solemnly. 'Both they and we,' he said. 'As, for instance, why should you not become Hetman of the Cossacks?'

'Peter has first to become somebody before I can become anybody,' I said; 'the Regent and Galitsin have taken a good grip, and are not likely to let go.'

'The deadliest grip can be loosened if you press tightly enough upon the gripper's throat,' said Boutourlin, laughing. 'Our man is scarcely yet sixteen. Let him grow and think quietly, and big things may yet come of his thinking and growing. You, too, go home and think, but do not talk. Remember that we shall want the Cossacks, and when the Government changes in Moscow a new Hetman will have to be found at Batourin. Remember also that we others are wide awake, even though the lion cub should yawn. All this drilling is not for nothing.'

These words caused me to reflect, as they were meant to do, and I decided that, since Mazeppa was already the Regent's man, I would be Peter's; for I could lose nothing and might gain much by entering into an understanding with the young Tsar. If he should come to the front I should certainly profit; in any case, I should be no worse off.

I therefore rode daily to Preobrajensky, and became each day more familiar with the young lion who, as Boutourlin expressed it, lay and yawned there, waiting upon time and opportunity.

Certainly the Tsar could not be said to hold himself timidly towards the Regent, his sister, as some declare that he was too much wont to do; for during the short while that I was in Moscow at this time I saw him twice defy her authority, taking the law into his own hands after a fashion that a timid youth could not have imitated.

The first time that this happened was in consequence of a freak which originated upon the parade ground when I was myself present.

The 'Pleasure Regiment' marched past in silence, and someone remarked that there should be a band of drums and whistles (or fifes) to play the men into good step. This would make the parade more lively.

'The Poutyátine regiment of Streltsi has them,' laughed one of those who stood by.

'Oh, oh!' cried Peter, 'we will raid them. Come, volunteers! who will help carry off these fifes and drums?'

There were many offers of assistance, and that evening the entire set of drums and fifes used by the Poutyátine regiment of Streltsi found their way in some mysterious fashion to the barracks of the 'Pleasure Regiment' at Preobrajensky.

CHAPTER XII

THIS affair of the fifes and drums was a notable one, because it led to the first revolt of young Peter against the authority of his sister and her minister and lover, Galitsin.

For the young Tsar was summoned to the Kremlin to answer for his misdeeds and to be made to promise that the drums and fifes of the Streltsi fellows should be restored to their original owners.

To the Regent's angry command that he should explain forthwith his conduct, Peter replied somewhat haughtily.

'You forget, sister,' he said, 'that I grow with the years; I am not forever to remain in swaddle clothes—a helpless thing to be fed with spoon meat!'

'At any rate for the present thou art no more than a child, and as a child thou shalt be treated,' said the Grand Duchess, flushing, nevertheless, and surprised; 'for the present also it is I that am set above thee, and I that am to be obeyed.'

'Thy voice, but that fellow's counsel!' said Peter, laughing and tilting his chin at Galitsin.

Galitsin flushed angrily, and asked Peter how he dared speak thus to his sister.

'And thou,' said the young Tsar, haughtily enough. 'Who art thou, Galitsin, to be present when the Tsar takes counsel with the Regent? Go forth, sir, into the ante-room and wait until thou art summoned!'

Galitsin looked bewildered and knew not what to do: he glanced at the Regent.

'Go, Liubyézny,' she whispered. 'I will bring the young fool to reason.'

Galitsin still lingered, and was about to speak.

'Do you not hear, fool?' cried young Peter, stamping his foot and actually taking a step towards Galitsin, over whom he towered by half an arm's length. 'Lord, sister, I will have better obedience from my servants when I am master!'

This—which was overheard by some who listened in the ante-room—was said to be the first roaring of the young lion who was soon to tear old Russia into shreds.

What passed between brother and sister after Galitsin had gone—pale and trembling—from the room, shutting the door of the ante-room after him, I cannot tell; but it is certain that the

drums and fifes remained at Preobrajensky, and that the conduct of young Peter grew bolder from this day, instead of conforming more strictly to the wishes of the Regent, who would have had the Tsar sink ever more helplessly under her control.

For instance, Peter now set up a recruiting office at his mother's palace, and here the names of many distinguished Russian families were to be found represented by the younger sons of the Boyars, youths who discerned in the service of Peter hopes of future advancement which could never be expected under Sophia's rule. It was these young Boyars, more than Peter himself, who worked silently for the revolution in Peter's favour which was to take place within two years of this time. For men say the Tsar recruited and drilled his men, and fortified his camp, and armed and mounted his troops, all for pastime, not seriously realising his strength or theirs, or his by reason of them ; but they worked deliberately and with the full intention to make of Peter's pleasure regiment a grim and warlike reality, by means of which one day the Tsar of their choice should be placed in power.

And Peter, having now found—perhaps to his surprise, but certainly to his great delight—that he had gained much by asserting himself,

began to take more liberty and to ignore his sister the Regent when her wishes clashed with his own.

Were horses required for his pleasure army? A detachment is sent to the *Konyúshannui Prikaz*, or cavalry department, in Moscow, and the required number of animals is driven out to Preobrajensky.

By the saints, any fool with a pair of eyes in his head might have foreseen which way matters tended!

Yet Mazeppa, who was no fool, and whose eyes were as good as most, made or appeared to make a mistake in this matter.

Peter the Tsar had observed Mazeppa in Moscow, and asked me of him. I did not praise him too highly, for I was anxious to stand higher with this young giant than he, Mazeppa having undoubtedly an understanding with the party in power, Sophia and her satellites. I had now begun to play a part in life—to have my own ambitious ends in view, in gaining which Mazeppa would be an obstruction. For our object, both his and mine, was the Hetmanate, to obtain which he would play Sophia and I should play Peter.

Therefore, desiring to keep my place in the young Tsar's regard, I did not speak too highly

of Mazeppa, though I allowed him to be a shrewd and capable person, of clerkly rather than military attainments.

'Can he not ride, then, like thee?' asked Peter; and I replied that all Cossacks are at home on horseback, as young ducks are in water.

'Devil take it,' said the young Tsar. 'Bring him down here, Chelminsky, and we shall see which of you two ducklings swims best!'

I was glad of this, for I knew that in fancy riding I was a better horseman than Mazeppa. Mazeppa knew this also, and was not anxious to accept the Tsar's invitation.

'Why should I take this trouble for the pleasure of a young fool that herds with grooms and moujiks and swills beer with his own cook boys?' he said. And I replied that this young fool, as Mazeppa was pleased to call him, was nevertheless joint-Tsar of Russia, and must therefore be obeyed.

'A Tsar in name, but without authority!' he laughed. 'Do you not know that Sophia is the mare that draws the chariot, and will draw it to the end?'

'That may very well be true,' said I, not willing to argue the matter, lest Mazeppa should become impressed with my own conviction that Peter was destined one day to assert his strength.

For at present Mazeppa, being an adherent of Sophia and accustomed to the cant of the Regent and her companions as to Peter's foolishness and worthlessness, was disposed to think little of this lion-cub, and misdoubted his strength and valour.

'Continue in that opinion, my friend,' thought I, 'for therein may lie my advantage if I have any luck!'

Nevertheless Mazeppa did come with me to Preobrajensky, being too much of a courtier, I suppose, to disobey the will of a Tsar, even though he looked upon that Tsar without much respect.

Peter constrained us to drink with his boon companions and would take no denial, and after these libations to the drunken god Bacchus he must needs set us, first to race and afterwards to exhibit our skill in Cossack feats and tricks of horsemanship.

The race was more a matter for our horses than for ourselves, and Mazeppa being the lighter man, I had fears that he might win. We galloped three times round the exercising ground of the 'Pleasure Regiment,' and at one hundred yards from the winning post were still neck and neck, I urging my good beast both with whip and spur, Mazeppa doing the same. Within a stone's

throw of the post his horse fell from exhaustion, leaving mine to gallop in alone.

'That is a good race,' shouted the Tsar, 'and well ridden by both, but he wins a race who rides the best horse. Let us judge which is the better Cossack—you, Chelminsky, or Mazeppa; show your skill, both, and you shall be judged by the votes of us who look on!'

Mazeppa would rather not have engaged in this competition, for in our own home I was accounted a better horseman than he, and Mazeppa was one who loved to excel and hated to be worsted.

In the tricks we essayed I showed my superiority, the Tsar and his companions clapping their hands vigorously and shouting my name; but the culmination of my triumph came when, at last, Mazeppa fell from his saddle in an attempt to pick up a pistol from the ground while passing at full gallop.

Mazeppa's misfortune set the Tsar shouting with delight and laughing boisterously.

Mazeppa was angry, first by reason of his failure, but still more on account of the bad manners of the Tsar and his satellites.

'He rides better than you, Mazeppa!' cried the Tsar. 'Well done, Chelminsky; it was well

done indeed; it may be that thou shalt be the Hetman for this one day, when I am master!'

I wished the Tsar had not said this. I saw Mazeppa flush and start and look quickly at the Tsar and at myself.

'Many things must happen before Chelminsky is Hetman of the Cossacks!' he said, and the Tsar laughed.

Presently, when a group of Peter's men stood about me, I observed that Mazeppa and the Tsar spoke together apart, and I was consumed with the desire to know what was said, for I trusted Mazeppa not at all, and I judged that he would not allow so good an opportunity to go by without stabbing me in the dark.

In this opinion of Mazeppa I did him no injustice, for the Tsar, in speaking with me alone a little later, informed me of his own accord of what had passed.

'Mazeppa is furious with you,' said his Highness, laughing, 'else he would scarcely give you so bad a character. You are too great a fool, Chelminsky, to become Hetman. So says Mazeppa. For Hetman a leader of men is needed, not a mere trick-rider of horses!'

'Better one that can ride than one who falls off,' said I. The Tsar laughed, after his manner, very loudly.

'Mazeppa will not shed tears for thy unkindness, Tsar,' I continued, 'for to say truth he pins his faith upon the Regent, not thee. "She will for ever sit in the highest place," says Mazeppa, "though the little Tsar Peter shall wear fine clothes and be called by a great title."'

Peter flushed and looked angry. 'Why said Mazeppa this, and why do you tell me of it?' he asked.

'Concerning what your Highness said of the Hetmanate,' I replied. 'Mazeppa would be Hetman, and doubtless the Regent will support him—has already so promised him, as I believe. Thus he is not alarmed by the threat of your Highness that I shall be Hetman, because, says Mazeppa, it is her Highness the Regent who shall appoint to the office, and not the Tsar Peter.'

'Oh!' said the Tsar, flushing, 'he said this, did he? Well, my friend, when we see, then we shall know!'

Riding back to Moscow Mazeppa was coldly disposed towards me. He spoke little, but said suddenly when we neared the city, 'If thou art wise, Chelminsky, forget what this youth said of the Hetmanate, for be sure that before Peter is Tsar Mazeppa will be Hetman; wherefore build no hopes and suffer no disappointment!'

'As to that,' said I, 'I may forget and I may remember!'

'Do as you please, my friend,' Mazeppa said, laughing grimly, 'but I think I shall win.'

Thinking all this over and knowing Mazeppa as I did, I determined that the safest plan in dealing with this fox would be to be a fox also.

CHAPTER XIII

I MET at this time with two adventures which I will now relate, since the first resulted in a friendship which was afterwards—and indeed very soon—of great use to me, and both are essential to the further understanding of Ivan's bride-choosing.

I was wandering near the Diévitchy monastery, which is the convent for the 'Devoted of the Female Sex,' and it occurred to me that here, indeed, was a good refuge for any who, like Vera Kurbatof, would escape the chance of being mated with Tsar Ivan against her will. My thoughts continually ran upon Vera at this time: her sweet though firm character attracted me much, and I began to think that I was not far from being in love with her. But if I suspected myself of this weakness, I suspected Mazeppa yet more of the very same, and perhaps it was this that, at the first, drew me towards Vera more strongly than even her own charm; for it had come to this, that I now felt my principal rule of

life to be opposition to and rivalry with Mazeppa. I must both obstruct him and oust him ; he had offended me more than once, and the Cossacks do not easily forget offence. Moreover, he it was that stood in my way, therefore I should make him feel that I stood also in his.

As to Vera, I knew as well as if he had told me in words that he had determined to make the girl his prey, whether honestly as his wife or in some other way. Therefore, above all things, he must not suspect that I, too, had an eye upon Vera. I would move stealthily ; he should neither see nor hear anything that would put him upon his guard in this matter. Mazeppa was a better fox than I ; he thought me a fool, however, which should give me an advantage.

Firstly, then, he should be led to believe that I was indifferent to Vera, and that might put him off his guard in speaking to me of the girl. We were still upon friendly terms, he and I, and went as dear companions ; but he had deceived and offended me more than once, and I felt not towards him now as I did in the old days.

A youth drove up to the monastery as I passed the door : this was a young Boyar, by his dress, though I did not know him. He clanged the great bell, and I heard him give his name as Rachmanof, and demand to see his sister. There

was a parley at the door, and presently he was admitted up some steps and into a little anteroom that lay outside the great doors leading in to the convent.

I lingered—I know not why—wondering whether anything of interest would happen, and almost immediately my curiosity was rewarded, for there came a medley of angry female voices, a piercing shriek or two, a curse and a scuffle, and then appeared young Rachmanof carrying the body of a young nun or postulant (for her hair, I observed, was not shorn), and followed by an old nun and two or three younger ones, who scolded and cried, and called aloud upon all and sundry for assistance.

'Help! help!' cried the elder woman. 'All good people prevent this sacrilege! Here is a villain would carry off one of God's devoted women. Help her, all who would serve Christ!'

The fellow took no notice of what was said or shrieked behind him, but dragged his struggling burden grimly on towards his *troika*, a three-horsed carriage, which stood in the road.

Then I stepped forward and took up a position in front of the carriage so that approach to it was barred by my body.

Rachmanof cursed and bade me get out of the way.

'I will let you pass when you have assured me of your right to take away this lady!' I said.

'She is my sister,' he cried, 'and as for right, who in the devil's name are you that question me?'

'I am one who will at any rate have an answer when I ask for information,' I said. 'Put the girl down and let us hear what you have to say.'

The older nun, shivering on the doorstep, cried out: 'Well done, good Cossack; be brave, for you act in God's service. This fellow would carry his sister to the Tsar's *terem* that she may be inspected among those who are candidates in the bride-choosing, she being one who has entered the exclusive service of Christ, having withdrawn from the world and its wickedness.'

'It's a lie!' cried Rachmanof. 'She escaped from home but a week since in order to avoid her duty as a Russian maiden—namely, to offer herself for the Tsar's consideration. She is no nun, her hair is unshorn; she is but a postulant, and has no rights such as this old hag claims for her. Therefore you, sir, whosoever you may be, move yourself out of my way, or it may be that you shall go back among your Cossacks limping.'

'Put her down,' I said, 'and let her go back whence she came. Shame upon you to use force with her! It is an accursed thing to tear a

maiden from the service of Christ, if she would so devote herself.'

'At any rate, it is not your business, but mine ; she is not your sister. This is a family matter : it is my father's wish that she should return to her home, and the Regent's command that she should attend the bride-choosing, though why I take the trouble to tell thee, Heaven knows. Come, out of my way ! I grow weary of carrying this fool of a girl.'

A crowd began to collect, and though some cried, 'Let him pass with her,' a greater number shouted, 'It is a sacrilege ; God's curse will follow those who offend one of His devoted. Take her from him, Cossack ; we will support you.'

'You hear ?' I said ; 'better put her down and make off quickly, for the people are against you.'

Rachmanof cursed and blasphemed, bidding me in the devil's name move out of his way, but I laughed and stood where I was. Suddenly he dropped his burden, and, grabbing at his sword, attacked me furiously.

The girl doubled back like a startled hare and quickly disappeared, she and her companions, including the old nun, shutting all the doors behind them.

I was ready for Rachmanof, for I expected his onslaught, but his attack was so violent and

at the same time so skilful that he almost bore me down at the first rush.

But I steadied myself in a moment or two, and for awhile our weapons clashed without advantage to either side, while the crowd about us shouted encouragement now to one and now to the other.

I hacked Rachmanof's arm, drawing blood, but it was no worse than a surface wound, though the sight of it roused the spectators to excitement and sent the balance of sympathy decidedly to my side.

'Smite, Cossack, and spit the bully!' cried some; and a few replied, 'For shame! let the Russian win, he is our brother—the Cossacks are thieving rascals, one and all.'

Then suddenly something happened that sent me toppling over, and as I fell a man brought a club down upon my head and I tumbled senseless in the road.

I know now that the driver of Rachmanof's carriage interfered in his master's interest and backed the horses in such a way that the carriage came rolling into me from behind, knocking my legs from under me. Then a sympathiser with Rachmanof suddenly ran in and smote me upon the head, and so—for the moment—ended all interest in the matter for me.

When I regained consciousness I found myself in a small room within the convent. This was the tiny ante-room, built out separately from the parent building, a room in which the friends of the nuns might have interviews with their acquaintances ; and here I speedily became aware that the old nun (who, I learned, was the Superior of the community) was busily fastening bandages about my head, which—presumably—had been somewhat roughly used.

'How did I get here?' I asked. 'And who has broken my head for me? Was it Rachmanof?'

'You were overcome by treachery. Yet the victory was yours, as for ever it has been and shall be on the side of those who espouse the cause of right and fight as the champions of Christ ; for see, Rachmanof is wounded and has driven away worsted, and his sister is here and safe, thanks to your intervention. Be sure the good nuns shall pray for you, Cossack, for this service, and I also. The prayers of the righteous travel far. You shall prosper in the world and shall have your desires.'

'You would not promise so glibly if you knew what they are, Mother,' I laughed. 'I am very ambitious.'

'So long as your ambitions do not transgress

the law of Christ who is our Master, I shall pray that they may be fulfilled to your comfort.'

'Oh, I mean no ill to any living soul,' I said. 'I would climb, certainly, but that need not be over the backs of others! Pray for me, Mother, that the deceitful may not triumph over me.' I thought of Mazeppa as I made this request, and when the Superior replied that both she and her nuns would pray heartily that I might prevail in a just cause, against devils, principalities, powers, and I know not what, I felt that I had scored many points against my fox-friend, Mazeppa.

'Moreover,' said the good woman, 'if there be any young maiden in whom you are interested whom you would rather see in this sanctuary than exposed to the degradation of the Tsar's bride-choosing in the *terem*, let her come here, in God's name, and we will take her in and cherish her for the sake of your service this day.'

I laughed and thanked the good soul—'Though I am a stranger and therefore not likely to desire sanctuary for any maiden consigned to the *terem*'—yet when I left the convent, presently, to return to my lodging, it occurred to me that the offer of the Superior might, after all, prove useful in case matters should become urgently dangerous for Vera Kurbatof.

CHAPTER XIV

And now for my second adventure.

On my way back from Preobrajensky one evening I met a man and a woman on horseback, both scolding one another at full voice—so loudly, indeed, that I could not fail to hear every word said as we met and passed.

It appeared that the man, who was the older, refused to permit the woman, who seemed scarcely more than a young girl, to take some course which she was resolved to pursue. When I had discovered this much their voices became inaudible, and I should have forgotten all about the matter but that I happened to find a lady in trouble in the forest next day, and in conversation with her recognised her voice as that of the scolding maiden of yesterday.

She was standing, when I first came upon her, in riding dress, and disconsolately gazed through the trees as though looking for someone she had lost, or whom she expected to arrive.

She started round when I rode softly up, and I now saw that I had to do with a most beautiful

woman, one of the most beautiful I had ever seen. She asked me somewhat angrily whether I had seen her horse.

'The fool shied at a hare that ran across his path,' she said, 'and as I was thinking of other things I was surprised and thrown—for which he shall feel my whip when I find him!'

'A hare to cross your path is bad fortune,' I laughed. 'It is to be hoped you are not engaged upon any enterprise in the success of which you are greatly concerned, for, if so, it is likely to fail!'

'Maybe I am,' she replied, 'but it shall not fail—that is, if the issue depends upon myself.'

'But maybe it depends upon the will of someone—a father or an uncle,' I hazarded, remembering the sobbing of the previous evening.

She started.

'Are you a wizard or a guesser?' she said.

'Certainly not the first; as to the last, I guess that you are she whom I overheard last night quarrelling with a man who might well be your father, since he appeared to be endeavouring to exercise authority, which you—with the licence of a daughter who is also a beautiful girl—resisted.'

'Well, you have made a close guess. My father and I—if it was really ourselves you over-

heard—had disagreed. You remember voices well.'

'Such a voice as yours, once heard, is no more to be forgotten than is your face, once seen.'

'Oh, by the saints, if you are of the flattering order of cavaliers, we shall not long be friends. Come, have you seen my horse?'

'No, I have not,' I laughed; 'but there is mine to be had for the asking.'

'You would not be best pleased if I accepted the offer—though I thank you for making it. I was riding away—I know not whither, perhaps a very long journey—when my horse threw me: if I took your horse you might not see him again!'

'That would be an irreparable loss only if he carried you away with him beyond return.'

'Well, I mean to return, and that is why I am escaping.'

'A riddle!' I exclaimed, laughing. 'Why are you escaping, if I may use the word—you who have only just arrived?'

'How know you that?' she asked sharply.

'That requires little guessing! If you had been long in Moscow I should have seen you. I can guess a little more if I be allowed.'

'Guess on, then!'

'You have come for the bride-choosing of the Tsar Ivan, but you have seen him and taken

fright ; and in spite of your father's commands or desires, you are attempting to escape from the fate you fear. And, indeed, if you do not wish to be Tsaritsa, either for this or another reason, you are wise to escape, for by all the saints I think there is only one among the maidens to equal you, and assuredly none to vanquish you if the prize go by looks ! '

She laughed merrily.

' Bravo ! ' she said. ' You are wrong from beginning to end. In the first place, it is my father who has seen the Tsar and who has taken fright ; in the second, I would give half my life to become Tsaritsa, even Ivan's ; lastly, I am escaping from my father, not from the *terem*, to which I long to obtain admission, though he has sworn I shall not.'

This was a surprising state of things, and quite the opposite of that which was usual as between daughters and fathers—the fathers being, so far as I had seen, for ever ambitious, while the maidens often preferred love to ambition—love, that is, for some lover who was not the Tsar ; or perhaps even presumed to allow a sense of personal antipathy to stand between themselves and their chance of high advancement.

' If that is so,' I said, ' the matter should be easily arranged. Your father dare not withstand

the *ukase* of the Regent. She need but be told that you are here, and that your appearance is worthy of the Tsar's regard, and you shall soon find yourself among those assembled for his inspection. Go home, if you are wise, and you shall be sent for.'

'But my father threatens to leave Moscow with me this very day; that is why I attempted to escape. I dare not go home to him, for in an hour I should be on my way back to our own place, which I loathe. It has taken us two months to journey from there to here, and I do not care if I never see it again.'

'Where, then, is this unloved home?' I asked.

'My father is Soltikof, Governor of Siberia. He is a good father, and loves me. He saw this Tsar Ivan for the first time yesterday. The youth became angry with someone and frothed at the mouth, afterwards bursting into tears; lastly, he fell in a fit! Lord knows what ailed him. "No daughter of mine," said my father in telling me afterwards of what he had seen at the palace of the Regent, "should marry such a creature as this, not if he were Tsar of all Christendom. Tfu!" he said, "the thing is a frog, not a man; fie upon her who should marry such a creature!"'

'And you, you think differently?' I asked.

'You would marry this frog-man for the sake of his Tsarship?'

'Bah! it is the name Tsaritsa one marries, and the clothes, and the beautiful jewels, and the power. What matter whether this man or that calls himself your husband?'

'Have you, then, seen him, that you speak so boldly?'

'Not I! He cannot be more loathsome than my father has represented him: whatever he may be I shall surely be agreeably surprised, for verily my good parent, in his anxiety on my account, has drawn the sorriest picture of a prince that fancy could devise. Is he indeed so bad? Can he speak—can he be understood—can he stand upon his own feet—can he wear a Tsar's clothes and sit upon a Tsar's chair?'

'Oh, he can do that much,' I laughed. 'He is an invalid, and has fits, but his brother Peter likes him well enough, and they talk and laugh together. To speak truthfully, I fear he would make a sorry husband, though his wife would have as much right to call herself Tsaritsa as the wife of the handsomest prince that ever drew breath.'

'Well, that is all that matters. Come, what meant you that my admission to the *terem* could be arranged? Did you mean anything? Who

are you? A Cossack, I see; that much is in your favour.'

'Why?' I laughed.

'They are independent and the slaves of no man: I suppose that is what I like in the Cossacks. If I were a man I would rather be Cossack than Russian. But come, what about the *terem* —who are you that you say you can get admission for me?'

'Your face would open every door——' I began, but she stamped her foot. 'Bah!' she cried. 'Enough fooling. I suppose, then, you meant nothing; it is a pity you spoke as you did.'

'I was going to say,' I continued, looking at her with approval—for, indeed, she appeared very beautiful in her indignation and impatience—'that though you would be admitted even if you presented yourself with no introduction save your own good looks, I think I can have you sent to the *terem* under the best of introductions—if you please to approve the suggestion: namely, that of the Tsar's brother and joint-Tsar, Peter, who is amiable enough to be my very good friend!'

'You jest!' she cried, flushing; but I disclaimed all idea of jesting.

'You shall come with me to Preobrajensky now at once, if you will,' I said; 'I ride from

thence at this moment. The young Tsar will send you forthwith to his brother's palace.'

So I seated the girl—Praskovia Soltikof—upon my own horse and walked by her side back to Preobrajensky ; and as I gazed in her face and listened to her animated talk, 'By the Saints,' I thought, 'you would make the best Tsaritsa of all the girls I have yet seen, for you have spirit enough both for yourself and also for the frog who would call himself your husband, and beauty that should make even his cold blood run warmer in his veins !'

She prattled all the way, telling me how dull was life in her Siberian fortress, and how she longed for change and for movement. She told me she had never had a lover, at which assertion I raised my eyebrows.

'You will have plenty, my friend,' thought I, though I did not say it, 'whether you marry Tsar Ivan or no ; for the man who could be near thee and not feel his pulses beat the quicker for it would be no man, but a thing of wood or of stone !'

Even young Peter, when he saw her, for all that he numbered but sixteen years, flushed up and laughed boisterously, crying that Ivashka would be a fool, indeed, if he saw not here something that would change his mind in the matter of his

marriage. 'By the saints,' he said, 'wench, thou shalt bid them send up more of thy stock when it comes to my turn. How old art thou?'

'Seventeen,' replied Praskovia, and Peter shook his head. 'Thou'lt be a hag before I am in middle life,' he said. 'Well, let Ivan see thee; I will write him a letter—he will not look at thee else. Lord! I should be a kind brother to thee,' he ended with a second boisterous laugh, 'if Ivashka took thee!'

CHAPTER XV

PRASKOVIA SOLTIKOF passed that night in the Tsaritsa's house at Preobrajensky, for young Tsar Peter would write his promised letter to Ivan, and that could not be done quickly, since at this time—though in after years he became a notable letter-writer—the writing of letters was a slow and laborious matter for him. In the morning I rode with her to Moscow, Peter having bidden her God-speed at departing, addressing her as 'sister,' to Praskovia's delight, and bidding her—in case Ivan should be fool enough to pass her by—return among the maidens who in two years' time would assemble for his own bride-choosing.

'I owe thee much for this, Chelminsky,' she said as we rode, 'and if I should become Tsaritsa I will not forget thy service to me.'

'Do not forget it in any case,' I laughed, 'such as it is; moreover, maybe I shall be privileged to add to it before many days are past!'

'As how?' she asked, surprised.

'You have not yet seen Ivan,' I replied. 'Perhaps when you have seen him you will take fright, like your father, or feel such an aversion towards him as no sentiment of ambition can withstand : then you may wish to escape the fate you now fancy so desirable, and in that case I shall be at hand to assist you, if possible, out of the quandary into which you have thrust yourself.'

'I tell you he may be as ugly as the fiend, as repulsive as a leper, what care I ? It is the sceptre I marry, not the man. They say he marries only because the Regent will have it so, and is incapable of preferring one woman over another. Others will choose for him and will choose the fairest, in the hope that he will afterwards develop so much manhood as to be moved by her attract tions ; but once I have him safely I shall take care that my attractiveness ends.'

'Well,' I said, 'I tell you honestly that I am sorry for you, and that I tremble to think what may be your fate if he should, by chance, take a fancy for you. Imagine such a creature pressing amorous attentions upon you—bah ! could you withstand such a thing ?'

'I am content to leave such questions. Do not attempt to frighten me : I desire to be called Tsaritsa ; it is a prize for which I am prepared

to pay a price ; yes, and I will pay it, though be sure I shall be a haggler in the matter of payment ! '

There was no difficulty in obtaining an entrance to the *terem*. I stated her name and the object of her coming, and the door opened at once. She gave me a smile as we parted, sweet enough to carry any man's affections by storm, and I left the palace with a heavy heart, feeling as though I had caught a beautiful lamb and brought it for sacrifice.

Indeed, I found myself heartily praying that this poor child might even yet escape the fate she courted. Maybe, after all, she would not be chosen. There were many others who were beautiful : two or three, certainly, might run her a close race. Olga Panief, in her own style, was as fair as the Soltikof maiden, and my heart beat with a savage hope that she might be preferred for the hideous destiny of becoming Tsaritsa to such a Tsar. She had jilted me in the expectation of doing better for herself at Court—let the Tsar have her and spare this other ! Lord ! how I should laugh to see Olga mated with such a creature—she who had presumed to throw over Chelminsky ! It gave me pleasure to picture to myself the awakening of Olga if she were chosen—awaking to the knowledge that she had

allied herself to this repulsive thing and that the marriage was a reality !

For Olga to be so caught would be the merriest of jests ; but for this innocent, this child Praskovia, or—worse still—for Vera Kurbatof, who deserved such a fate least of all, since she did not, like the others, desire it !—for her to be thus offered a living sacrifice !—that would indeed be a matter to make the gods weep !

As for Vera, she was at this time in great danger, as I have shown ; for it seemed to me and to many others well informed that the Regent Sophia had set her heart on the poor girl as the Tsaritsa-to-be—dear saints ! she to be the life-companion of such a Tsar !

But though this were so, and I am still assured that it was, the Regent was none the less determined that his Highness should have every opportunity to choose for himself a better or fairer consort than Vera Kurbatof, if such could be found ; and for this reason she was most strict and most severe in her dealings with the maidens brought to the *terem* for inspection and selection—that none should escape before inspection, or should employ arts by which they might render themselves less attractive in appearance than nature had made them. For there were some who did not hesitate to disfigure themselves

by staining their teeth, scratching their faces, or affecting a limp, in order to escape the being chosen. These back-holders were the minority, of course, and very few at that; for the greater number were content to throw everything else to the winds if only they might reach the highest place and be called Tsaritsa. Doubtless those few who were unwilling to be chosen were they whom Love had so securely entangled in his net that the poor fluttering things had lost their heads and were unable to see salvation except in struggling for freedom.

Thus some preferred, as I say, to disfigure themselves, and a few tried to escape; and among these latter was a fair maiden, Doonya Meschersky, who was so terribly in love with her lover, Kostromsky, that they could not wait upon events, but must needs take destiny into their own hands and attempt in clumsy fashion to shape their own ends.

This Kostromsky was a desperate and determined swain. Doonya, like other unwilling candidates, had been forced by her father to enter into competition with her peers; but Kostromsky swore by all the saints that he would see to it the Tsar should not reap where he had tilled, and the two devised a plan of escape which they endeavoured to carry out when

Doonya had been but two days a prisoner in the *terem*.

Doonya fell ill, or seemed to, having first bribed the old *nyanka*, or nurse, who was in charge of her dormitory to declare that she had taken an infectious malady, and was therefore a danger to all the rest. The old nurse ran crying through the *terem* that Doonya Meschersky had taken the fever and must be removed at once, and away ran a messenger for her own doctor, who was to be found, said Doonya, at a certain address.

This leech was of course Kostromsky, who was impatiently awaiting the summons, and accompanied the messenger back to the palace in hot haste.

'The *nyanka* is right,' he said, upon seeing Doonya, who made a show of raving and tossing upon her bed; 'this is the first stage of the blood fever—the *Barishnya* must be removed immediately.'

Whereupon Doonya was wrapped in coverings and carried by the doctor himself out of the dormitory and down the stairs which led to the street. But unfortunately the Regent and Galitsin met the party upon the stairs, and her Highness would know what ailed the girl and who was this that carried her away.

The *nyanka* replied that a calamity had happened : here was a poor *Barishnya* taken with fever of a dangerous and infectious kind and must be moved, said this good doctor, before others were tainted with it.

'And who is this good doctor, and why was not the Court physician summoned?' asked Sophia.

'She would see no leech but her own!' said the *nyanka*, weeping and crossing herself. 'Poor lamb, that might have been chosen Tsaritsa but for this sad infection——'

'Pooh!' said Sophia, interrupting. 'Lay her down here on the landing, and go, someone, for Drury, the Court physician.'

When this Englishman came he soon pronounced Doonya well enough, looking hard at Kostromsky the while, whereupon Galitsin, suspecting the family doctor, pulled the wig from his head and revealed Kostromsky, whom both he and the Regent knew well.

The issue of the matter was unfortunate for both the conspirators, for her Highness treated them with severity, in order to deter other fools, as she said, from behaving in a similar fashion. Poor Doonya was taken straight to the flog-room, where she tasted of the knout and was then thrust back into the *terem*, to be laughed at or pitied

by her companions, according to their dispositions.

But as for Kostromsky—whom, as it happened, Galitsin hated because he was a *Petrofsky*, or follower of young Tsar Peter—a strange fate was reserved for him.

'Why have you done this thing, fool?' Galitsin asked the poor youth, when Doonya was led weeping away to her punishment.

'She is my *nevéysta* (fiancée),' said Kostromsky boldly; 'do not dare to have her flogged, Galitsin, or I swear that one day I will have revenge.'

'What!' exclaimed the Regent Sophia, 'you would marry—is that it?'

'I both would marry and will, Highness,' said Kostromsky.

'He speaks truth,' laughed Sophia. 'Here, one of you, go fetch a priest, he shall be married at once: take the *nyanka*, some of you, and dress her for bride. Lord, if the fool is anxious to be married, he shall have his way!'

In vain did poor Kostromsky entreat, threaten, blaspheme—the Regent had no reply but laughter; and sure enough, before the hour was out, this youth—and a handsome youth, too—and this hag of seventy were man and wife—so far, at least, as the ministrations of a priest of the Orthodox Church could make them so.

Thus did her Highness endeavour to terrify those of the selected maidens who would prefer to work out their own destinies rather than accord to the Tsar the traditional privileges of Russian Tsarship.

CHAPTER XVI

Much of that which now must be described was not, of course, witnessed by me in person, but—from one source or another—has been gradually communicated to me. Nevertheless, of the accuracy of the version I now place upon record I am completely satisfied.

There had been much scheming in various directions, so soon as it became an accepted matter that the Tsar Ivan was to be married, whether he would or no, for the dynasty's sake. In the first place, it must be communicated to the bridegroom himself that he should be led, presently, to the altar, together with his bride, whomsoever he might choose.

But Ivan waxed very wroth at the communication, stamping his foot and flushing, showing more spirit than was usual with him.

'I have told you that I do not wish to reign,' he cried. 'My brother Peter likes to be first and to speak loudly ; therefore, I have told him

and I have told you also that he shall reign, not I. What is the succession to me? Let Peter marry when he is old enough, and leave me alone —you, sister, and you, Galitsin, and you, Miloslavsky. I have done you no harm.'

'But see, dear Ivan,' said the Regent Sophia, 'you have come to man's estate, and men should marry. It is the intention and the will of the Almighty that they should do so; go not contrary to the laws of God. Your life is dull and lonely; why should you not choose for yourself a companion, as other men do, to comfort your days? You shall settle down presently in your own palace, and if it be the pleasure of the Almighty you shall be a happy husband and the happy father of children.'

'As for whether you shall reign, or Peter Alexeyevitch, or both together, that is another matter, and nothing to do with this,' said cunning Galitsin, who had no intention, however, to allow anyone to govern the realm except his beloved mistress, the Grand Duchess Regent, whether Peter should sit upon the throne, or Ivan, or both together.

And Miloslavsky, Ivan's uncle, added that if the Tsar would but inspect the assemblage of beautiful maidens already prepared for his regard he would not long stand out against the wishes of

the Regent, his sister, who knew well what was best for his true interests.

But all their efforts failed to induce Ivan to look with favour upon the idea of matrimony.

And for a week the great company of young maidens waited in the *terem* of the palace, yawning and story-telling, and longing for an end one way or another to this state of tension, and to the long dull period of do-nothing.

It was whispered by some, gossiping with one another, as maidens would naturally do, that Ivan had refused to be married, and this report gave rise to some merriment and also to much bitter disappointing of ambitious hopes.

Thus it was a surprise to all when one morning four persons entered the *terem*, of whom three were men and one a woman. The men were Galitsin, Mazeppa—prime favourite at this time, both of the Regent and her admirer—and Ivan himself, the lady being, of course, the Grand Duchess Sophia.

The maidens were engaged upon their dreary daily business of gossiping, sewing, fortune-telling with cards, and so forth, and this incursion into their sanctuary caused much agitation, much reddening of pale cheeks and the paling of some rosy ones ; much smoothing of skirts and of

unruly locks that had escaped the restraint of band or of ribbon.

It was obvious that Ivan came unwillingly, if not unwittingly, into the midst of the maidens' sanctuary. He started as he entered, and blushed, half turning as though to retreat.

'No, no, Vanushka; be a man and a Russian Tsar!' said Sophia, pushing him forward; and Ivan, with an angry look and a passionate word thrown back at his sister, obeyed and went forward.

But though certain of the maidens sighed as he passed, and some made audible whisper to one another, praising his beauty and what not—his beauty! and he assuredly the most niggardly endowed of mortal men in all that should make a man attractive to the opposite sex!—and though one picked up his handkerchief which he dropped as he went by, restoring it to the Tsar with a smile and a blush that suited her marvellously, he never glanced either at this maiden or at her fellows, but walked stolidly through the long chambers in which they stood and curtsied, his eyes fixed upon the ground and wandering neither to right nor left, even for a single instant.

Mazeppa's eyes on this occasion were very busy, though Ivan's were not. I have it from

him, who was ever a good authority when the fairness of the ladies was the theme, that there were present that day some very exquisite types of Russian beauty. Of our own Cossack maidens one at least shone radiantly even in the midst of this constellation of charming maidenhood, and that was the fair and haughty creature who had preferred the distant chance of a very high seat, by the side of witless Tsar Ivan, to the certainty of a moderately honourable position as my own bride. Mazeppa laughed when he told me of this.

'By the glory of love,' he said, 'Chelminsky, I believe she did wisely enough after all to take the chances! for if ever this fool of a prince opens his eyes and looks out among these young women, our fair Olga is as likely as any to attract him.'

'And that is no chance!' I replied; 'for it is well known that he will not look out among them; and I think you know this as well as the rest.'

'Why so? And what do you mean?' said Mazeppa.

'I mean Vera Kurbatof!' I laughed. 'You might have left my Olga at Batourin for all the chance she has here. As it is, you have lost her a moderate lover in me, and found her no better!'

'Fear not for her, my friend,' he laughed; 'there are as good birds in the nest at Batourin as have flown out of it. Olga will not lack for lovers, even though Chelminsky should sulk! But I am not yet assured that Tsar Ivan will not after all look beyond Vera for a bride. They say he has forgotten her. Let not Vera be too sure of her advancement.'

'Her advancement!' I exclaimed. 'Have you then forgotten that you yourself are pledged to protect her rather than allow that very advancement to take place?'

'I have not forgotten, of course,' he said; 'but it would be a better and a safer way if he should reject Vera by his own free will and prefer another. Heaven knows there are some here that might tempt the very saints themselves. There is Olga Panief, for one; then there is a mysterious beauty whom none seem to know—Kozlof they call her, from Novgorod; lastly, one whom to see is to love—Praskovia Soltikof, whose father is the Governor of Siberia, which is as far away as heaven. Do not let yourself behold her, my friend, for to see her is to lose your heart.'

'Then, what of your own, since you have gazed upon her already?' I laughed.

'My heart is proof,' he replied, laughing also,

though not quite at his ease. 'I have already found food for my love to feast upon. Do not question me now ; the time comes when you shall know all, and maybe you shall help me in a certain matter.'

This reply of Mazeppa's caused me to reflect, and I now began to realise that my friend intended to play a deeper game than I had guessed.

But I must return to the matter of the Tsar Ivan and his bride-choosing, which indeed was somewhat pressing, for it was impossible to retain so large an assemblage of maidens to wait upon Ivan's conversion. For who could tell how long this backward lover's masculine spirit would require ere it would take root and develop and mature—even so much spirit as would suffice to lift his bashful eyes and see for himself the wonderful sight presented for his delectation, and then to say, 'This one is best, or that, or another.'

Therefore, to the delight of many agitated, sanguine maiden hearts, it was decided that the first choosing or weeding out of the maidens should be done by others and not by Ivan himself, in the hope that, if no more than a score, or perhaps even a smaller number, were left to choose from, he might show himself less averse to inspect them ; or at any rate he might be induced to look upon them one at a time.

Therefore six men were named to assist the Regent in this first process of weeding out, and again Mazeppa was of the number, the other five being Galitsin, Miloslavsky, Shaklovity, and two whose names are unimportant.

Then began much finessing by Mazeppa and certain others who had their own games to play, and of these games we will first watch that of Mazeppa.

Vera, be it remembered, Vera the beautiful, having already been seen by Ivan, and, as many believed, approved by him, had been exempted from living with the rest of the maidens within the *terem* of the palace.

Now, when Mazeppa was chosen as one of the judges who should make the first sweeping, he came in excitement to me.

'Go, Chelminsky,' he said, 'and bid Vera come quickly to the palace. Tell her that I ask this of her by design and for her advantage.'

'For her advantage?' I exclaimed. 'Explain first how this should be, for surely Ivan will see her and will immediately show his preference for her, if only by fixing two pig-eyes upon her face, as heretofore.'

'No,' said Mazeppa; 'let her come. I am chosen as one of those who are to weed out the unsuitable, that they may be despatched to their

homes. Do you understand ? I shall see that she is struck from the list this very day : thus she shall receive a passport and may disappear. That shall be the first move. I will see her at the palace and instruct her further.'

This seemed a good plan, so far, and I went to tell Vera of it.

CHAPTER XVII

I took Mazeppa's message to Vera Kurbatof, but Vera was agitated and disinclined to accept the suggestion of my friend.

'It is foolish,' she said, 'and dangerous. What if the Tsar should see me and say something, or even look something? all would then be lost. Remember, I would die rather than be chosen by him. Moreover, does Mazeppa think that the Grand Duchess forgets so easily? Tell him that I was sent for to the palace and that the Tsar kissed my hand. That was my death warrant unless I escape. I tell you, as I myself was told by her Highness, that I am kept in reserve as a kind of trump card: these other maidens are a mere concession to the Tsarish custom and to the feared expostulations of the Boyars, who are accustomed to enjoy the chance of providing each Tsar with a bride. The Tsar will not look seriously at them. It is mere foolishness to bring me into the lion's den. How shall I come forth again, think you?'

'Mazeppa, I suppose, has some scheme for your salvation. It is he that suggests it: he would scarcely place you in the lion's den—he of all others—unless he knew of a way to get you out again, and once for all!'

'Why he of all others?' asked Vera.

'You seem to have left your fate in his hands: he will help you to escape, but be sure that he intends to profit by your devotion to him!'

'My devotion to him? You use a foolish term, sir. There is no speculation in Mazeppa's generosity. He has offered to help me from motives of pure sympathy. He would not see me made a living sacrifice.'

'Why think you so well of Mazeppa?' I asked.

'He has understood my position and has offered to save me from that which would be worse than death to me. There has been no talk of reward. He wishes for none and asks none. As for devotion, that—as I say—was a foolish expression. There is no such thing on either side.'

'So be it,' I said; 'only be sure that Mazeppa is not one to labour for nothing.'

Vera was silent for a little while. At last she spoke.

'I see that you imply more than you say. Do you then know so much of Mazeppa that you mistrust his motives in offering to assist me?'

'I know that Mazeppa admires a good-looking woman,' I laughed, 'and that you are one; also that he admires you even more than other fair women; and lastly, that what Mazeppa admires he covets, and what he covets he generally obtains, by fair means or foul.'

'You should need to know a man well indeed before you would speak thus of him,' Vera murmured. 'Why do you suggest this of Mazeppa?'

'To say truth, because I do not wish you to put yourself in his hands. He is dangerous.'

'But if I do not so, what else am I to do? to whom shall I go for help? You are kind and appear to take an interest in me, but have you any alternative plan if I refuse this of Mazeppa?'

'I should be cruel indeed if I disadvised one plan and had no alternative to suggest,' I said. 'As for "interest in you," perhaps I, too, know a beautiful woman when I see her!'

'And, like him again, are not one to labour without reward, you would say? Go away then, sir; I have no rewards such as you suggest, either for yourself or for Mazeppa. I will find

some way out of this danger without your help or his. Fie, sir! are you not ashamed to speak so?'

'You go too fast!' I said, laughing. 'It was your own suggestion, not mine, that I expect a reward for serving. I expect none. I only said that I am interested in you because you are beautiful: is that so great a sin?'

'It is enough to indicate that having served me you will afterwards ask a reward. All men are alike.'

'Well, see now, Vera Stepanovna,' I said, 'you do me injustice, for I had been married ere this, but that my bride was carried off for the Tsar's choosing. A man thus used may surely be credited with disinterestedness in offering service to a woman!'

'If that is so,' she said, after a short silence, 'I will listen to your proposal. Forgive me if I did you an injustice,' she added; 'it may be that in my present terror and agitation I have lost my manners.'

'I forgive everything at such a time,' I replied, 'for I understand that you speak and act as one who stands at the edge of an abyss. I see no way of escape for you excepting by disappearance. That is my view of the matter. If you stay here, that is at your father's house, you remain in con-

stant danger, almost as much so as though you were actually within the *terem*——'

'That is true,' she said, sighing; 'but your scheme, if that is the whole of it, is but a barren one; for how is a maiden to disappear in this city, more especially one who is well known and easily found?'

'There is more in my scheme. I suggest that you go for sanctuary, but secretly of course, to the Diévitchy monastery.'

'And take the veil? Oh, no, no! I love life and freedom, and God's air. I could not be a nun with shorn head and a heart as bare of hope and the joy of life!'

'You need not be a nun. You shall seek refuge for awhile only, until the Tsar is well married and all this is forgotten. Your hair may remain a crown of glory to you as now. God forbid that it should be taken from you!'

'You speak impossibilities. You do not know how strict is this community. Once lie in their clutches, and forever the world is shut out to you, and joy and the delight of living and of loving—oh! there could be but one thing worse: to be married to this prince. Oh! why am I so plagued for my sins that I must choose one of two such horrible things? Search your imagination, good Chelminsky, I pray you; think of a better way!'

'This is a good way, be assured. It so happens that I have done these nuns and their Superior a service for which they have promised me a return. I shall demand that they give you sanctuary, and they will concede it. When you wish you shall come out, and with you shall come your golden head all unshorn, and your heart no more dead to the joy of living and loving than to-day—in short, you shall come forth, when the Tsar is safely married, just as you now go in!'

'Oh, Chelminsky, do not jest with me!' she cried, her hands clasped together, her eyes full of tears. 'How could you obtain so great a favour? What is the claim you have upon these holy women? Remember, there is the curse of God for liars; more especially for such as lie to the ruin and despair of helpless women!'

I told Vera the story of my encounter with Rachmanof, and of his sister's attempted abduction from the convent, and how the Superior had expressed gratitude for the service I rendered this lady in preventing her brother in his designs.

'Oh, Chelminsky!' exclaimed Vera, flushing and seizing me by the arm, 'beware, I beseech you, after this. I know him, this Rachmanof: he is a man of evil temper; he will kill you at sight. His sister is beautiful. I do not wonder

that you should have risked so much for her sake!'

'Oh, believe me,' I laughed, 'I scarcely looked at her face. What I did I should have done for any woman so situated. Come, is my offer a good one? What say you?'

'It is so good that I scarcely dare believe in it. Can I trust you? The Cossacks, it is said, are a wild race, caring little for the rights of others, or for the honour of women, so only they have their way. You have shown me that Mazeppa is not to be trusted; how can I tell that you are any better, who are his friend?'

'You cannot tell, of course. Cossacks are said to be untrustworthy, and you cannot be blamed for your doubting. Mazeppa is a fox whom I have only lately caught in my own fowl-run: do not take him into account or measure me by his standard. Let him be. For the matter of that, let me be also if you will not trust me. I desire to serve you, that is all I can say—believe it or not.'

Vera gazed for a little while into my face. 'I do not think you are altogether trustworthy,' she said, a faint smile playing for an instant about her mouth, 'judging, I mean, by your face. I fear that you do not consider it wrong or dishonourable to deceive others to your own

advantage ; yet I am inclined to trust you now——'

'Because you must, and there is no other way,' I cried, laughing aloud. 'Come, speak the full truth and I will do the same. Yes, I think little of deception when it is necessary to my well-being ; but I am a poor deceiver compared with Mazeppa. In this I am not so good a Cossack as he ; in other ways I think I am a better. At this moment I am altogether honest ; I do desire to serve you——'

'But why ? If only I could understand your motive in this I should be easier in my mind.'

'Lord knows,' I laughed. 'If you will have my opinion, however, I believe it is that, since I have discovered that Mazeppa admires you, I have begun to admire you also. I have lately determined to get the better of Mazeppa, or try to do so, in every matter in which our destinies meet, throughout life. I suppose, therefore, that I wish you to think better of me than of him.'

Vera was silent for a moment. Then she burst into a delightful torrent of laughter, so that for a while she could not speak.

'Come,' she said at last, clapping her hands and coughing, 'that is truth, real naked truth. Oh ! what a motive ! But it is truth, and I will trust you. Come, when shall we go ?'

'This moment, it you please,' said I, gazing at the girl in a kind of rapture. I had never seen her look so beautiful as now, with the colour in her cheeks and the tears of mirth in her eyes. She was charming indeed !

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Superior was kind and cordial, and hesitated not a moment when asked by me to receive Vera for a while under exemption from the strict rules of the convent.

She took Vera's hand and patted it, laying her own presently upon her golden crown of hair.

'Too fair, too fair,' she smiled, 'to be shorn! Are you in some danger, my pretty?'

'In great danger, mother,' said Vera. 'The Regent would have the Tsar Ivan choose me, and indeed I would sooner die!'

'There is no need for that,' exclaimed the Superior, laughing kindly, 'for in case of extreme danger you should be received here under full vows, and who would dare to touch you then? That would be better than death, child; believe me, we are not so terribly miserable here, though we have withdrawn from the outside world. If we do not hear its laughter, neither do its moans distress our ears.'

'Nevertheless, good mother,' said Vera, 'I

would sooner remain in the world. God may be served without these walls as well as within them.'

'That is both true and untrue. But remain in the world by all means, pretty: who would prevent thee? Moreover, we are most of us disappointed women—we have had our sorrows, our bereavements, our sins, many of us, and therefore we are here. You, I doubt not, have reason enough for desiring neither to be Tsaritsa nor to enter sanctuary; maybe, also, I can guess the reason.'

The good old woman glanced in my direction, smiling very kindly. 'Oh, well, well,' she ended, 'we have all been young once. God send thee happiness, my child, of the best that the world can give, and remember, in case the world prove illusive and disappointing, that there is pure happiness to be had here also, even though it is not that which the world generally esteems highest.' Vera blushed, but spoke up frankly.

'Mother, it is right that I should undeceive you, for you are mistaken. I am heart-free, and this good youth is in love with another maiden, who is, alas! in the *terem*, as I should be also but for his kindness and yours!'

'Dear Mother of the Lord!' exclaimed the old woman, raising her hands in pious horror.

'In the *terem*, and he loves her? Can you not save her, good Cossack, and bring her to us? Heaven forfend that so good a youth should be so ill-treated by fate! Bring her to me, my son, bring her to me, as you have saved two already from the danger of loveless marriage.'

'Let her be, mother, let her be!' I cried, laughing; 'she went of her free will, deserting me for the chance of selection as Tsaritsa. I am under no illusion: she is not one to be wept for. I have torn her from my heart, and be sure I am none the worse!'

I saw Vera flush and listen as I said this, and the sight pleased me well. The old lady sighed.

'Poor youth, you have done wisely, yet you must have suffered much! Be comforted, your heart will find its home; rest assured, so brave a one will not go long a-begging. Now farewell, my son, for I have many duties and the days are too short for those who toil in God's service. Stay, this pretty one will desire to hear news of the bride-choosing, and of the Regent's attitude when her disappearance is discovered. Come here, if you will, from time to time: you shall see her in the ante-room which is set apart for such meetings. By our rules another must be present, but do not fret lest her secret should be known to others, for I myself shall be that third

party. Now come, my pretty, and you—good Cossack—depart.'

'If they send, mother, to seek her, what then?' I asked, my hand upon the door.

'They may send, but they will not find her!' smiled the good old woman.

And Vera, as I left the room, gave me a glance which I liked well—a look which I analysed in my memory many times afterwards, and most carefully, and from which at each recollection I derived satisfaction and delight.

'That is a girl who can love like another, in spite of her piety, and her gentleness, and her honesty and other rare qualities,' thought I, 'and will love well. Happy he who gains that heart, for I think he will find it true gold. Moreover, that man is not Mazeppa!' This last consideration afforded me wondrous comfort and delight, and I dwelt upon it so long and so lovingly that I almost forgot to consider what was my own chance of winning where he had certainly lost.

When I did take this matter into consideration and weighed it together with the glance which Vera had thrown in my direction as I left the convent—well, I felt a glow of renewed delight.

'I will out-fox you in this, old fox Mazeppa,' I thought, 'or it shall not be for want of trying.'

And when I had come to this determination I returned to the city in order to acquaint Mazeppa with the disconcerting fact of Vera's mysterious disappearance, and to enjoy his surprise and probable anger and disgust.

I found Mazeppa at his lodging.

'Well?' he asked, and waited with evident anxiety for my response.

'Not so very well,' I laughed. 'That is, she is, I suppose, safe, but it has not happened as you desired.'

'It has not?' he said, looking annoyed. 'Wherefore not?'

'She has disappeared. She is not at her home, and her father knows nothing of her whereabouts.'

'By all the devils!' exclaimed Mazeppa, growing suddenly furious. 'How dare she disappear when I had promised to succour her and see to her safety?'

'Ask her that when you find her!' I said haughtily. 'How should I reply to such a riddle?' Mazeppa stamped his foot with anger, but controlled himself.

'But where do you suppose she has hidden herself? has she taken a horse, servants, and so forth? Tell me the details, man, as you know them! Do you not see that I am anxious

about the girl and must know all you have to tell?'

'I have told all I have to tell. She has disappeared. If she is wise she has gone a long way and will tell to no one where to seek her. You should hope this as much as I. Do we not both desire that she should escape from this loathsome marriage with the Tsar? If so, what matters it to us where she is, so long as she is safe? The further the better, say I!'

'That is true, of course,' said Mazeppa, with a quick glance at me. 'My own object, no less than yours, was to get her out of the way and into safety; but I am interested in the girl, and would prefer to keep in touch with her.'

'Yet how awkward that would be, if it should occur to the Regent to suspect you and to put certain awkward questions to you. As it is, you can reply, if asked, that you know nothing. At any rate, I suppose you do not hold me to blame because the girl has disappeared?'

Mazeppa glanced keenly at me and flushed.

'I had not thought of it until you suggested it!' he said. 'If the girl were anything to you I should certainly suspect you; but I believe she is not.'

'Anything to me—she, this yellow-haired chit? Oh, she is too pious and gentle for us Cossacks, Mazeppa; she is not the stuff we look

for, we Cossacks. I think she is not much to either of us, though I confess that I had imagined at one time you looked somewhat fondly upon the girl.'

'You are a fool, Chelminsky,' said Mazeppa. 'Do you suppose I should take so much trouble to help the girl out of her troubles if I took no interest in her? I tell you she is a finer girl than I have seen in the Ukraine!'

'What, finer than Olga Panief, whom you tried to steal from me?'

'Lord, man, she stole herself from both of us. Olga is a fine wench, but she is not fit to lace this other's bodice!'

'Oh, is it so?' I laughed. 'Then, indeed, we must see whether she cannot be found, this timid Vera of ours! Lord, Mazeppa, you should have told me of this before.'

'Well, now you know it: show your friendship by finding the wench,' he said. 'You have nothing to do in Moscow: I am busy as an official at this choosing. Exert yourself, Chelminsky, I beseech you, and find her, or trace of her.'

'Would you marry her, Mazeppa?' I cried, 'or would it be a mere spiriting away of the girl?'

'Oh, it is too soon to speak of such things,' he replied, smiling; 'first find her, my friend;

earn my gratitude, for, seriously, I am badly thrown by her disappearance.'

'Well, I shall see what I can do!' I replied; but I left Mazeppa with my tongue in my cheek; for this time, for once, I had out-foxed him. I had the wench under my thumb, and he had revealed his game. A good day's work, by the saints!

CHAPTER XIX

FROM this time things began to go somewhat contrariwise. There came excitements and perils and failures, together with some successes and certain moments of great joy ; but the smoothness which had been my portion in life during late years became changed, and I travelled over rough and stony roads.

There was uproar in the Kurbatof mansion when it was discovered that Vera the fair had fled without farewell. Old Kurbatof, that proud and angry old Boyar, was furious with rage.

'The minx has wrecked her own fortune,' he cried ; 'she who might have been the first woman in the land ! I tell you the Tsar is sick with love for the wench—dear saints in Heaven ! and she must needs object to this in him and to that, and disappear rather than share the throne with him. Oh, the fool ; the blind, senseless minx ! As if the husband mattered when a crown and sceptre go with him !'

'Maybe she is in love with some young

coxcomb, Boyar!' ventured a servant; but the Boyar fell upon him and struck him with his *dubina* so that the fellow lay for a week and groaned.

'Let her be a hundred times in love, what matters?' he roared. Then he assembled the household and gave out that if any man dared whisper outside the house that the *Barishnya* Vera had disappeared he should be punished with fifty blows of the knout and sent to the estate to work in the fields. 'Let her be found before the bride-choosing,' he said, 'and there shall be one hundred roubles for the finder. Till she is found not a word—remember, one and all, or I swear the devil shall be a gentler master than I!'

Notwithstanding which threats, however, the secret did leak out—as shall presently be seen—though Vera's departure was fortunately not known at the palace, where all were busy with the rest of the maidens, of whom the whole number were by this time assembled.

As for me, I went boldly here and there as before, and there was no suspicion that I knew anything about Vera and her disappearance. Whether Mazeppa suspected or not I could not with certainty discover, for if so he did not show it. Indeed, Mazeppa would be the very last person to go to

for any indication of Mazeppa's own feelings on this or any matter, supposing that he desired to preserve his sentiments to himself.

But two days after Vera's admission into sanctuary I, guessing that she would be anxious to know how matters went with regard to her disappearance, determined to visit the Diévitchy monastery, in order to assure her that all was so far well.

Now I was not easy in my mind with regard to Mazeppa and his suspicion of me. Knowing him as I did, it was impossible to think that he would not be suspicious : it was an equal wager that his spies were on the watch in order to acquaint him with my doings, where I went and whom I saw, and so forth.

Therefore I resolved to go most circumspectly, to walk half round the city before bending my steps towards the monastery, and to keep my eyes wide open the while on all four sides of me.

And thus I became aware, before I had gone far, that there followed in my steps a man unknown to me. Wheresoever I went, there was he. As I turned out of a street and glanced behind me, there he was entering it at the further end ; or if I stopped in the midst of a *pereoolok* (lane) and looked back, perhaps he was tying his

shoe-lace, or he had turned almost as quickly as I, as though he desired me to think that he walked in the opposite direction.

'Oho, my man,' thought I, 'it is well, and very well. We will go into a quiet place I know of, you and I, and there we shall enjoy a little private conversation!'

Having now made sure that my man was certainly dogging me, I looked round no more lest I should alarm him; but taking a short way to an outskirt of the city I brought him in safety to a lonely spot, where I turned a corner and waited until he should come round and fall into my arms.

This he did very quickly, and no sooner did his face appear than I sprang upon him and had him pinned in an instant by the throat against the wall.

'Now, my friend,' said I, fiercely enough, 'before I choke your life out at the mouth, who set you to dog me?'

'Let go of me and I will tell you,' he said, 'if you will spare my life afterwards.'

I let him go. 'Well,' I said, 'who?'

He gazed up the street and down it, as though in search of help; but he found none.

'Quickly,' I said. 'Before I count three; one—two——'

'Mazeppa the Cossack,' he muttered. 'But for the sake of all good saints let him not know that I told thee.'

'Thanks, friend,' I said. 'Be sure I shall not. You were to watch where I went: is that it?'

'Where you went and whom you spoke to, and all you did.'

'Did you follow me yesterday, then?'

'All day long; it was yesterday early at morn that I took the Cossack's orders.'

'Good. Well, I shall not tell of thee. Meanwhile here is a rouble; and if thou art wise, continue in the pay of Mazeppa, for he shall know nothing of this; only do not follow me; take his money but remain at home: do you understand?'

The fellow laughed and thanked me and went his way: I had no fear that I should see any more of him.

But it was now too late to carry out my intention of going to see Vera, therefore I changed my mind and paid Mazeppa a visit instead.

We spoke of the bride-choosing, and I asked Mazeppa whether anything had been heard of Vera.

'Not a word,' said he, 'unless it was you that heard it!'

'And wherefore I?' I asked in assumed surprise.

'Only that you have doubtless made inquiries, and I was in hopes you might have heard something of her.'

'Tell me, Mazeppa, do you suspect me of concealing anything from you in this matter? Do you believe me to be less honest with you than you are—I doubt not—towards me?'

'Suspect you, my best of friends?' exclaimed Mazeppa. 'Heaven forbid! Why do you ask so foolish a question?'

'Well, I have a reason. You must know that as I walked out this day I became aware that I was dogged by some unknown rascal, and I must confess that the idea did occur to me that for some reason unguessed by me you had set a watch upon my goings. Now that I reflect upon the matter, I see that the suspicion was foolish and baseless. Yet who should have set the rascal to spy upon me, and why?'

'That is impossible to guess; but at any rate do not suspect your oldest friend,' said Mazeppa. 'Could you not compel the fellow to declare himself?'

'A man must be caught before he is compelled,' I laughed, 'as a hare must be trapped

before he is stewed ; and like a hare indeed the fellow ran.'

I watched Mazeppa's face as I spoke, expecting to see at least a look of relief, but my fox gave no sign.

'That is a misfortune,' he said, 'that you could not catch the rascal, for I wager you would have found him no employed spy, but a very common cutpurse with a better opinion of your purse's weight than it deserves !'

'True !' I said, 'I had not thought of it.'

'For who in this city would desire to spy upon you, of all unlikely people ?' he continued ; 'you, a poor Cossack, unknown to all, or near it !'

'Yes, it is true, I was a fool, I own it !' said I, sighing. 'Shall I confess to the end, Mazeppa, and tell thee all I suspected ?'

'Say on !—confess, and it may be that I shall give thee absolution,' said Mazeppa, laughing, 'if thy sin is not too great, and thy repentance is sincere !'

'Well, believe it or not,' said I, affecting confusion, 'but alas ! it is true that I actually suspected that thou—being somewhat in love with this Kurbatof maiden—wert, lover-like, apprehensive that all others must see her with thine

eyes, and therefore must needs suspect innocent me of hiding the wench for my own purposes, having me watched, moreover, in case I should thus reveal her private hiding-place by visiting her ! '

CHAPTER XX

'Oh, foolish Chelminsky!' exclaimed Mazeppa, 'that is going out of thy way, indeed, to find cause of quarrel with an old friend. I am attracted by the wench, true enough; but must all men sigh for the same woman? Fear not, so little do I suspect thee that I entreat thee to show thy friendship for me by finding this girl, or helping me to find her.'

'And this fellow—the spy who followed me: you know nothing of him?'

'Nothing, my friend—what should I know? I may have my opinion—namely, that he was a robber and no spy; but as for knowing—what should I know?'

'Swear it by thy horse and lance!'

'Oh, most suspicious and unfriendly of friends, I do so swear, if so it must be!'

'Good; there is no more need for suspicion. If I catch the fellow following again, I shall kill him at sight for a mere cutpurse, or rather for a would-be cutpurse.'

'Do so, my friend,' said Mazeppa; 'he deserves his fate for having come, in a manner, between old friends.'

'Verily, Mazeppa,' I thought, as I left my fox, 'thou art a most wondrously gifted liar!' For indeed he had lied thoroughly, even taking our Cossack oath in witness to his falsehood, without the twitching of an eyelid.

This day I went out to visit Vera once again at her monastery, but though I looked constantly and carefully for followers I observed none, and it is certain that I was not watched. I reached the sanctuary in safety, moreover, and was received first by the Superior, who was pleased to see me.

'For thy fair friend perishes to hear news of all that is happening at home and at Court,' she said; 'and, if the truth must be known, I believe she will not be averse to see her preserver and knight, being somewhat anxious for his safety lest he be suspected of capturing and concealing her.'

'Let her come, good mother,' I said, 'for indeed I begin to think there is no sight on earth that delights me more than her fair face.'

'Ah—ah! said I not so?' murmured the good soul, gently patting my arm as she left the room to fetch Vera. 'So the faithless maid who

preferred her chance at the *terem* to thy assured love is already forgotten ? Oh, man, man ! this Vera is too good for so faithless a swain ! '

' It is not my fault, mother,' I said ; ' do not speak me ill to Vera. I do not fawn where I am beaten ; I can show a true heart when I am shown one.'

' Well, well ! hers is golden, my friend, little doubt of that : he who wins it must prize it too highly to give her in exchange a thing of dross.'

Vera entered, blushing and excited.

' Is all well ? ' she said. ' Good Chelminsky, tell me quickly ! '

' Well, and very well,' I replied ; ' though it almost went very ill, for I was spied upon yesterday, being suspected of knowing your whereabouts.'

' Suspected ! and by whom ? '

' By a very cunning person, whose wiles are infinite, and whom I should name " the father of lies " if that title had not already been appropriated by an ally of his——'

' But who—who ? ' she cried.

' Oh, who but Mazeppa ! ' and when I told Vera the whole story of the spy and his confession and Mazeppa's denial, she agreed that this was indeed a deceiver of whom it was necessary to beware.

'But what of the palace and of my father?' continued Vera. 'Have I been missed by the Regent, and what has my father done? for he, of course, has long since discovered that I have left home.'

'At the palace they are so busy weeding out the plainer blooms that the fairest flowers are for the present neglected; therefore, you have not been asked for. As for your father, I hear privately that he is most distressed that you should attempt to evade the glorious destiny which Providence and his own parental solicitude have opened to you. He has forbidden any word to go out concerning your disappearance, lest it should be known at the palace. He reckons upon finding you before your disappearance is known to the Regent.'

'Oh, for the love of Christ, good Chelminsky, he must not—he must not! Were you careful in your going this day? Are you sure you were not spied upon and your destination noted? My father is as cunning, maybe, as Mazeppa himself.'

'I am certain that my coming was not observed. I frightened my former friend too well; he remained in safety at home, be sure, and there was no other. I tell you I doubled and dissembled in my going as a bear does at the first

snowfall, when he chooses his winter's lair and would put trackers off the scent.'

Vera laughed for joy, her apprehension relieved. 'Thank God if that is so, and thank you also, good Chelminsky ; be sure your kindness is not forgotten. But what steps has my father taken to find me?' she asked, growing grave again suddenly.

'He has sent word to your country estate. Your nurse declared that you had threatened to go there if pressed.'

'It is true, it is true!' cried Vera, clapping her hands. 'I did so. Oh, Chelminsky, it is a four days' ride at the quickest, and four back—that is eight days. By the time they return the Tsar may have made his choice, and I shall be safe.'

'Good, and very good ; let us hope it may be so. Meanwhile,' I continued, lowering my voice—for the good Mother Superior sat reading her holy book at the other end of the room, being present according to the law of the community—'supposing it were suddenly suggested that you might be here, and the place were searched, would you be safely concealed?'

'I am told that it may be done, but I should be frightened, indeed, if it came to that. Let us hope that such a danger may not arise.'

'Yes, let us hope so,' I said. 'Nevertheless they hope best who have assured the future; therefore decide beforehand what is to be done in case of surprise. If there is a private chapel, hide in the Holy Place.'

'How can I? No woman is admitted there.'

'Well, I think our old friend here is not one to stand upon ceremony in emergency. There is no resident priest; no one will prevent you. Think of it. It is a good hiding place, and I am glad I thought of it. Suggest it to the mother in the moment of danger, and you will see.'

A moment of danger came most unexpectedly, even as we sat there and whispered together; indeed, a truly unfortunate and mistimed occurrence, and one that must have had terrible consequences, but for the most wonderful mercy of God, the protector of the innocent.

For even as we spoke of possible danger, there rang out a loud and startling peal at the great bell which hung in the entrance hall.

The Superior started to her feet. 'A visitor,' she cried, 'and oh, how ill-chosen an hour! Be comforted,' she added, seeing our frightened faces, 'I will tell the door-keeper to admit no one.'

She left the room. Vera clung to my arm, and I drew her to me.

'Be not afraid, Vera; I will protect you though all the world rage at the gates demanding you.'

'Oh, Chelminsky, I am frightened!' she said. 'Do not let them take me to the Tsar; I will not live to be his wife. I will tell him so. Oh, God help me, God help me!'

'He will help you, never fear,' I said. 'In this I shall be God's soldier; I shall fight the better knowing that the protecting of you is the service of God!'

'Give me your sword,' she said suddenly; and, drawing it herself from the scabbard, she first made the sign of the cross over it, and then kissed it thrice.

'Let it pass through my body rather than see me carried back to the *terem*,' she said. 'I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of Sophia and of Ivan: his touch is poison to me.'

'Well, I will fight to the death first,' I said.

Meanwhile the great door had been opened and I heard a parleying. There were men's voices and the voices of the Superior and the old woman who kept the door. The voices grew louder, and there was one which seemed familiar, though I did not as yet recognise it. This voice grew more threatening, appearing to insist upon some point which the Superior contested.

Suddenly I recognised that louder voice : it was that of the young fellow Rachmanof, with whom I had had a set-to on behalf of his sister, whom he attempted to carry off from this very sanctuary. The discovery filled me with joy.

'Be of good cheer, Vera,' I whispered ; 'they come not for thee, but for the sister of this young Rachmanof. We were frightened too soon, wench ; they are not thinking of thee ; thou art safe !'

'Oh, thanks to Him from whom are all mercies !' she began ; but at this moment there came loud cries for help from the Mother Superior and the other woman, and I could do nothing less than rush out to their succour.

On the single flight of steps that led to our ante-room, as well as to the door which communicated with the main building, I saw a notable spectacle, and one which has lingered in my memory.

First, near the top of the stairs, stood the tall, gaunt form of the good mother, holding her great silver cross aloft as she cried for help. A few steps below her stood Rachmanof, sword in hand. God knows whether he had meant to strike the old woman down or merely to frighten her, but there was the sword.

At the foot of the stairs were two other young

fellows, dressed in the uniform of the Streltsi regiments. These two held between them the form of the old doorkeeper, having gagged her mouth to stop her crying.

Their lips had been opened to laugh, but at sight of me their faces settled into a grim expression, and Rachmanof flushed and looked furiously angry.

They had shut the outer door behind them, fearing, doubtless, that any uproar might assemble a crowd whose attitude would be hostile to them.

CHAPTER XXI

RACHMANOF glared at me for a moment.

'So!' he said. 'You again! Well, it is bad luck for you, my friend, that I have caught you, for this time you shall not escape me: you have a reckoning unpaid!'

'Oh, I will pay it twice over, friend!' I said. 'Here is my money-bag!' I tapped my sword and laughed.

'Let the old scarecrow run,' said Rachmanof, half turning his head towards his companions; 'let her pass, Cossack, she will be in our way. Disappear you also, shameless old hag,' he continued, wagging his finger at the Superior. 'A fine mother of innocent maidens, you! Fie! A man in the house, and of all men a filthy Cossack! Fie, I say!'

'Rachmanof,' I muttered, 'for that speech you shall die if I can kill you. Go, mother, go into the ante-room, and pray your hardest that I may kill this beast.'

'Yes, pray your hardest,' laughed Rachmanof; 'he will need it!'

'Fight in God's name,' said the good old woman, disappearing into the ante-room. 'I will pray for God's curse upon those who invade this holy house.'

The old doorkeeper pushed past Rachmanof and disappeared also, crying and muttering prayers or curses, or I know not what. The two Streltsi fellows came several steps higher towards Rachmanof.

Then the fight began without further delay.

Rachmanof made a quick lunge at me with his sword, but the blow fell short, and I laughed aloud at him.

'You will have to come to closer quarters, Rachmanof; there is no help for it,' I said. 'It is dangerous, I admit, and mighty unpleasant, but it must be done!'

With a curse he ran three steps upwards and lunged again. This time it was necessary to parry, and I replied with a counter thrust which he just, but only just, contrived to turn aside.

Then the two others came nearer, in response to Rachmanof's orders. 'Seize your opportunity to rush in,' he said, 'as soon as you perceive an opening.'

There was a slight pause while Rachmanof and his men took breath, watching me, and thinking how best to overpower me by combination.

Luckily, the stairs were too narrow to admit of two men fighting abreast, else I suppose I should have been overpowered, for they were good men, all three.

During the pause I could distinctly hear the good Superior praying fervently in the ante-room, of which the door was open.

Then suddenly Rachmanof rushed upon me, and after him another, whose rush was useless, however, for he found himself obliged to wait at Rachmanof's heels, and when he tried to lunge at me his sword nearly pierced his friend's shoulder.

I had the best of it as to position, and of this I was determined to take full advantage. His rush was easily stopped, and when I assumed the attack it was not difficult to drive him downwards, since I smote at him from above. Step by step he descended, and his supporter was obliged to descend also, for Rachmanof would otherwise have trodden upon him.

Nevertheless, he fought well for his ground, and did not cease striking and thrusting at me, defending himself at the same time with great skill.

Then I tried a trick upon my man. I pretended to stagger backwards, in order to draw him forward with a long thrust. This succeeded. He thrust so vigorously that he was half overbalanced,

and I brought my sword down cleaverwise upon his skull.

Down he went backward into the arms of his friend, who, however, instead of laying him down and giving me a moment of breathing time, held him up with his left arm and lunged instantly at me with his right. The movement was so rapid that I could not withdraw my foot in time, and I received a nasty dig in the soft of my leg.

But my man found he had made a bad speculation, for, rushing quickly upon him while he still stood hampered by his unconscious companion, I easily passed through his scrambling defence, and he dropped Rachmanof with a curse as my sword cut through his arm.

Then he stood and stamped his feet, cursing at the pain and shouting to the third man, who stood at the foot of the stairs, to come forward and help slay the filthy Cossack who had wounded both himself and Vassia.

'Better leave me alone, friend, and take these fellows away, lest a worse thing happen!' I cried aloud, with a laugh. 'See what an advantage I have in this position!—be sure I shall spit you if you come nearer!'

The fellow seemed to consider for a moment, while Rachmanof lay and groaned and the other sat and cursed. He came close to Rachmanof

and examined his wound, which was an ugly gash in the head, and did not look likely to have a quick mending.

'Can you fight any more, Gregorief?' he asked of the other fellow, who sat and cursed with a hole in his shoulder or arm.

'How the devil can I fight with my sword arm pierced? A pretty coward are you to hesitate: spit the jeering beast through the stomach, and maybe I shall be able to help in sending him on towards hell.'

Almost before he had finished speaking, the third man, the unwounded one, made a rush upwards as though to lunge at me with his sword, but instead of doing so he suddenly ducked his head, and, spreading himself forward on his face, very quickly and dexterously seized my ankle, and with a violent tug upset me, so that I fell upon the back of my head on the stairs. It was a mighty crash, and as I fell I heard a kind of tumult on the landing above me; but from the moment my head touched the floor I knew nothing until I regained consciousness in the ante-room, and observed with surprise that I lay there with Vera weeping at my feet and the good mother praying at my head, as though I were already a corpse.

I felt pain in my leg and pain in my left arm,

and a most racking pain in my head, so that for the first few moments I could not for my life remember what had happened to me. 'What is the matter?' I asked. 'What has happened? Why do you weep, Vera?'

'You have fought a great fight for us, my son,' said the mother, 'and have put to flight our enemies, for which the blessing of God shall rest upon you. Vera weeps because she fears you are sorely hurt, but I think there is no cause for fear. You have two flesh wounds, and a terrible blow on the back of your head has sent your wits wandering; but you will soon be better now that you know us and can speak. Do you remember fighting young Rachmanof and two others on the stairs?'

'I remember now,' said I. 'Where are they? They have not prevailed, mother? Oh, surely I did not allow them to pass up?'

'No, no, all is well, my son: they have departed, all three, and his sister is safe within. She knows nothing of the danger she has been through this day. Do your wounds pain you?'

'Not much. I do not remember this one in the arm. How came I by that? After I fell?'

'I will tell you. There was a rush of your enemies upon you, and we heard the scuffling and cursing. Vera was alarmed for your safety, and ran out upon the landing just as you fell back-

wards. When you fell the wounded man gashed you with his sword, which entered your arm; then Vera——'

'No, no, mother, have pity!' cried Vera, closing her ears with her hands. 'Do not speak of it. I have killed a man, Chelminsky, and I am accursed—there! I have said it. How should God or man love a woman who has slain a fellow creature? I tell you it is an accursed thing for a woman!'

'Peace, Vera, you did not kill him, for he was alive enough to walk into the street alone. Peace, I say, child. Listen, Chelminsky, and I will tell you all. You may, I think, under a merciful Providence, thank Vera for your life, which was nearly taken. Vera snatched your sword, which had fallen from your hand, and with it attacked so furiously the fellow who had struck at you as you lay that he cried for mercy and rolled down the stairs out of the way. Meanwhile I dragged you, with Vera's help, into this room, locking the door behind us. Presently, hearing the street door open, I looked cautiously forth, and lo! our three men were departing. One was, I think, almost or quite untouched: he it was that supported Rachmanof, who seemed badly wounded, though he stood upon his feet. As for him

whom Vera struck at, he walked out, as I say, by himself. Nay, Vera, be comforted, child, for now I think of it, he was alive enough to shake his fist at me, and curse me!' The good old woman laughed and patted Vera, who now stopped crying.

'Curses do not lie upon such as thee, good mother,' I said, laughing. 'Cheer thee, Vera! Be sure thou art not accursed. I am glad indeed the fellow carried away a beating from thee. Did the sword bite? Did blood flow?'

'Nay, leave the matter, it is painful to her,' said the older woman. 'Vera is gentle, and has seen no blood shed up to this day. Let her be, Chelminsky.'

'At any rate, be thanked, both, for your good service to me!' said I; 'for indeed I am glad to live. Oh that you had beaten that third fellow, Vera, even more soundly! The rascal! he threw me by a trick. I will not rest until I have made his head buzz for him as he has made mine!'

'Nay, that you cannot,' said the mother, 'for you are not fit to move, and shall not. Are you content to lie here for a day or two days? There is an old sister within who is clever with herbs and plasters: she will mend you as quickly as the best of leeches.'

'It is not necessary,' I said. 'I would rather go. This fellow Rachmanof and the others will tell all the world that I was here. I should soon be chased out.'

'If I know mankind, they will say nothing of this day's work. What, three men to one, and the beaten three to brag of it? Fear not, there will be silence.'

'And what of Vera? Do you know these men, Vera? Would they have recognised you?'

'I know not who the two Streltsi were. As for Rachmanof, he would know me, but he was dazed or unconscious, and I think he did not see or recognise me.'

'At any rate, I will go,' I determined; 'for who knows what these fellows will do or say? Better that I should be free to act how I will from without.'

With the words I tried to stand upon my feet; but a mist came before my eyes, my head swam, and I fell back fainting. And there on my back I lay for a week, almost senseless for the first half of it, but quickly recovering throughout the last four days.

During my weakness several things happened that I knew nothing of until afterwards. The

ante-room in which I lay was kept locked on the outside, and the key remained in the good mother's possession, so that no visitors were allowed to enter the chamber occupied by me.

But visitors there were, and important ones, as I must now describe.

CHAPTER XXII

It appeared that Vera was recognised, and that one of the Streltsi officers spoke of having seen her at the Diévitchy monastery, though he said nothing of me or of the fight on the stairs and his own discomfiture. The report quickly reached the ears of the Boyar Kurbatof, who came in person and was received haughtily by the Mother Superior.

'I have come for my daughter, who is detained by you without permission,' said the Boyar.

'This house is a privileged sanctuary,' replied the good mother. 'No man, not even a father, may exercise authority over those maidens who have espoused the service of Christ, renouncing the world and its vanities.'

'But Vera has not done so. I am told that her hair is not yet shorn; she has taken no vows; therefore I demand her instant release.'

'And I refuse it,' said the brave mother.

'I will tell you, reverend mother, why I demand the wench,' said the Boyar, changing his

attitude. 'You, in your seclusion here, know little of what passes without. The Tsar Ivan chooses a bride, according to the customs and privileges of the Russian Tsars. Now, my daughter is virtually already chosen Tsaritsa, if only she choose to accept the honour. Think how great a position is this offered to her. Think only what this means, to be Tsaritsa. What power, what wealth shall be hers ; how magnificently will she be able to reward those who have benefited her ; how — for instance — she may favour this establishment and its head, multiplying your privileges and loading you with riches and every kind of favour.'

'We are content as we are, Boyar, and we do not desire such worldly advancement as you describe. Touching this matter of the bride-choosing, the maiden would sooner die than be married against her will to the afflicted and unfortunate creature who, though less than a man, is nevertheless called Tsar of Russia.'

'It is well that foolish maidens do not have the making of their own destiny : such things are left to those who have wisdom and experience.'

'In this case a good choice has been made and cannot be unmade by force or authority. Therefore return, Boyar, whence you came ; for be sure you shall not find Vera.'

The Boyar, finding that he could make no impression upon the mother by entreaty and the promise of great rewards, next had recourse to violence, threatening the wrath of the Regent—to whom he would now, he said, carry this matter—and I know not what besides. But he gained no more by threats than he had profited by promises, and in the end the Boyar returned without his daughter.

But on the second day a worse thing happened than the visit of an angry Boyar.

For the Regent Sophia arrived in person, bringing with her a bishop of high degree and a guard of several soldiers.

Kurbatof had, it appeared, actually carried out his threat and had complained at Court that his daughter Vera, the destined bride of the Tsar, was a prisoner at the Diévitchy monastery. The Regent came in anger and indignation.

'What is this?' she cried, storming at the good mother. 'What is this I hear of thee? To give sanctuary to one whom the Tsar would choose for his wife, and against the will of her father? Thou takest too much upon thee, woman. Art thou so great, being chief among many silly women, that thou knowest not there are some greater than thou?'

'All this I know and recognise, Highness,'

said the old woman, humbly. 'Outside these walls thy brother the Tsar, together with thyself, is as God ; but within we render the first service to God and His Christ, even though His will should be in opposition to that of the Tsar.'

'*Vzdor*, nonsense ! What knowest thou of the mind of God ? thou knowest it no more than I. A silly maiden is fearful of the splendid destiny offered her, and thou must needs set down her timidity to the will of God. Be sure it is better to obey the will of the Tsar, of which you may be certain, than invent for thyself the interventions of the Almighty, whose mind thou understandest no more than I. Come, where is this wench ?'

'She has claimed sanctuary, Highness. I will not produce her except I be compelled by force.'

'So—then take her keys, men : you are a fool, woman, and should know when it is wiser to yield than to be firm !'

'While I am head in this place the only wisdom is to act according to my conscience, since my simple desire is to serve God. You will not gain, Madam, by using me thus. I foresee the day when you yourself shall flee for refuge to this sanctuary.'

'Indeed ? Well, I will tell thee what I foresee, and the prophecy shall not be long in

the fulfilling. Thy rule shall end this day—nay, it has ended now ; have you the keys there ? Open the great door, then ; follow, you ; we shall set in your place a wiser, if we can find one in this community of lack-wits ! '

The procession then entered the monastery, where they found nuns and postulants at their dinner in the refectory, and among them Vera, who had expected no such visitors, or she would have hidden herself.

'There she sits,' said the Regent, kindly enough. 'Come, little frightened dove, that flew from the nest for fear of fowlers. Look not so frightened, we are neither fowlers nor birds of prey ; we wish thee no evil, but great good. Come, the Tsar awaits thee and will choose thee for Tsaritsa if thou put not on that scared look ! '

Poor Vera glanced at the Superior, who followed behind her Highness, but the old woman shook her head ; tears were in her eyes, and she sobbed as she said, 'Nay, child, I can do no more for thee ; they have broken into this House of Peace. I am no longer in authority here.'

'Mind not what this hag says,' said Sophia. 'She has forgotten that she is no less a subject of the Tsar than any other in the land who

would also serve the Almighty ; she has given thee evil counsel, but she shall lead no others astray. Come—I weary of talking—get thee ready, for thou shalt go with us to the Tsar.'

'Madam,' said Vera faintly, 'I desire to remain here. I have no wish to——'

'Enough—take her up, men——'

And Vera was then and there seized and borne shrieking away to the *terem*, where many notable things happened, which shall presently be set down. But before she departed from the monastery the Regent chose a new Superior, recognising one among the nuns whom she had known well beforetime. Her she placed in the old mother's seat, compelling the latter to take up a position at the bottom of the table, whereat sat humbly the non-professed sisters and the postulants of the community, as though she had only that day entered upon the religious life—the latest of all those present, instead of the first and the most respected and beloved.

And I lay senseless as a log while all this passed, little knowing or guessing the perils which compassed me about. For what if the Regent had sought Vera, first, in the little locked anteroom wherein I lay, and had there found me—a hawk in this doves' nest ! But by the mercy of the Highest and the wit of that good woman, the

mother, I was spared this misfortune. For I was afterwards told that when one of the Regent's men inquired of the Superior what room was this, and whether the escaped maiden were here, the mother replied that this was the hospital room. 'I swear she is not there,' she said, 'and it is useless to disturb those who are within the chamber ; they are sick, and need repose.'

Be sure that when I returned to consciousness and learned all these things I could lie no longer in peace. Very quickly my wounds mended—for they were but flesh-cuts, and my banged head was the worst matter of all !—and within a week of the fight I insisted upon going forth once again, which I did in spite of the tears and entreaties of my good old friend, the late Superior, and of another who had nursed me.

'Let me go,' I said, 'for I shall recover the sooner when my mind is at ease and I can see and hear for myself what is passing without.'

'Promise thou wilt get into no more brawls until thou art well and wholly recovered ?' said the mother. And this I promised, leaving the good woman, however, in tears of distress. 'For, said she, 'thou art pale and worn and not fit for fighting and for scheming, and yet how else is Vera to be served ?'

'Dost think I shall attack the Tsar's palace single-handed, good mother?' I asked, laughing. But she shook her head and answered nothing, except to make over me the sign of the Cross and to mumble a prayer as I left the chamber.

CHAPTER XXIII

THOUGH I had laughed to ease the mind of the good woman, I felt indeed but little disposed for mirth. My mind was full of Vera, for I had a horrible dread that she would be forced against her will to submit to marriage with the Tsar. I hastened therefore to Mazeppa's lodging, for well I knew that if there was anything to know, whether of Vera or of anything else, Mazeppa would be the one to know the first news and the last.

'A ghost!' he said, as I entered and greeted him; 'one risen from the tomb indeed, and limping, by the saints—what, wounded? Whom now hast thou found to brawl with?'

'It is true that I have fought: one day I will tell thee all there is to tell. To-day thou must be narrator, for I long to hear news. First, what has passed at the *terem*?'

'Much, and many surprising things. Has Olga Panief found thee yet?'

'Olga? surely not—why seeks she me—is she not in the *terem*?'

'That is a part of what has happened, but there is much else. Vera Kurbatof——'

'Oh, she is found?' I asked, feigning indifference, but failing utterly.

'At the Diévitchy monastery, and brought to the *terem*, where she was placed among those who had been reserved for the Tsar's final choice—six of them. But stay, I remember now that all this must be news to thee. How long hast thou been absent wounded—a week? Then there is much to be told, and I will tell from the beginning.'

Then Mazeppa began and told me the tale of that eventful week.

The Tsar having shown himself unwilling to go among so large a company of maidens, it had been decided to weed out the greater number, and to leave only those whose supreme beauty gave them particular claim to the Tsar's regard. Among these chosen six were the girl Soltikof, whom I had brought to the palace with a message from young Peter. I was not surprised that she should have been chosen to be among the selected, for indeed she was both beautiful and vivacious, a maiden who might wring admiration from a very stone. My chosen love of former days, the Cossack maiden Olga Panief, was another of the six, the remaining four being no

less beautiful maidens, each in her own way, though their names are not necessary to these records. To these six was added Vera Kurbatof, found and brought to the *terem* in the nick of time.

The seven were then paraded before the Tsar, who on the first occasion was sulky, or timid, or what not, and refused to raise his head to look at them, declaring that he would not marry ; that they had assembled these wenches in vain for him. 'Let them go,' he said. 'Let who will have them ; I want none of them.'

Then the seven were returned to the *terem*, and for that day the farce was over. But in the night, when all slept or were supposed to sleep in the dormitory set apart for them, the Regent, with the Tsar at her side, passed among the beds and examined carefully each sleeper's face and any part of the beautiful forms or limbs which might have escaped by accident or design from the coverings. It was known well enough that it was customary for the bridegroom Tsar thus to feast his eyes, before finally choosing his bride, upon the most beautiful of his maidens, rendered unconscious of his presence by sleep. Therefore, if one were proud of a beautiful arm or neck, she was careful to fall asleep with this exposed to view, that the Tsar might observe and admire.

Vera had cried herself to sleep, and lay—supremely beautiful—with the tears still upon her cheek. The Tsar flushed as he glanced at her. 'She hates and fears me,' he said, pointing at her with his chin, 'and therefore I fear her also.'

But when he came to the bed on which the Soltikof maiden lay modestly covered, the flush of sleep upon her beautiful cheek, his breath came and went.

'Holy Mother!' he exclaimed, 'here is one I have not seen. What is her name?'

The Regent named the girl, thanking her saints that Ivan seemed at last to take an interest in one, at least, of the lovely models of womanhood wasted upon him.

'This one is well enough,' said Ivan, passing on, 'if she too does not hate me, like that other!'

The nightly inspection was not the only trial through which these chosen seven were compelled to pass. They were constantly questioned and examined by the Court doctors and dentists and by experienced women appointed for the purpose.

Besides this, one of the seven, being constantly among the rest and taking part in all conversations, was instructed to act as spy upon her companions, in order that their minds might be studied by those with whom lay the choice of

Tsaritsa, as well as their bodily constitutions. This maiden, by name Maria Apraxin, reported all opinions uttered by the rest, and all conversation bearing upon the subject of the afflicted Tsar and his intended marriage.

In consequence of these reports three fair maids who had laughed at the Tsar when alone with their companions, suspecting nothing, were informed next day that their chance was gone, and the *terem* doors were open to them to pass out. There remained now only Olga Panief the Cossack girl, Vera, and the Soltikof maiden, besides the spy, who was no longer a candidate, but only the agent set to watch and observe the others.

Vera never spoke, or scarcely ever. She sat and mused and sometimes wept, but took little part in conversations. It was Olga and the Soltikof maiden who did the bulk of the talking, though the spy Maria Apraxin began most of the discussions.

Then one day the Tsar passed through the *terem*; it was the morning after his first sight of the sleeping maidens. There were now but these four present. He strode past Maria without raising his eyes above her feet. He passed Olga Panief with but a glance. Then he came to Vera, and paused a moment as though he

would speak ; but Vera did not raise the lids which concealed her lovely blue eyes, and the Tsar walked on.

Lastly he reached the place where the Soltikof stood and blushed, waiting for him with every artful trick and captivating air ready, so to say, to hand to be employed in the fascination of the Tsar.

Ivan paused and looked at her with admiration, and Praskovia Soltikof returned the look with tenfold intensity. She smiled and blushed and glanced from under her up-curled eyelashes. She knelt, and would have kissed his hand, but he drew it back. Then she took up the edge of his kaftan and kissed that instead.

'By the saints,' said Ivan, 'you are as fair as any, unless it be Vera Kurbatof, who is afraid of me and hates me.'

'Hates you, Tsar ? Oh ! how can anyone do so ?'

'Yet she does, though I have never done her ill, nor would do so. What is your name ?'

'Praskovia Soltikof, Highness. I have come all the way from Siberia to give the Tsar of my best.'

'Of your best ? and what is that ?' said Ivan.

'My heart, Tsar, my love, my duty and devotion—all that I have and am—myself.'

'Good! But you would be afraid of me, like this other.'

'I swear I would not, Tsar.'

'Well, see here, Praskovia Soltikof: ask this Vera whether she cannot change her mind towards me, and if she cannot or will not, I know not but what I will choose thee, since my sister will have me married whether I desire it or no.'

Praskovia's face underwent several changes during this speech: the expression which remained the last upon it was one of triumphant happiness.

'Oh! Tsar,' she said, most intensely; 'I am not worthy!' But Ivan passed on and said no more, and when he had gone out of sight and hearing a storm arose.

For Olga Paniet, whose temper was never of the best, flew out and called upon Vera to speak up and save the Tsar and the nation from having this Praskovia Soltikof for Tsaritsa.

'She is a toady and a liar,' cried Olga. 'Did you see her blush and cast down her eyes when he spoke to her? Did you hear her vow she would love him and honour him, and I know not what besides? Faugh—it sickens me to hear her! Speak, Vera Kurbatof, and save us all from her: it is you the Tsar would have, all the world knows that; it is you he loves, not this toadying, fawning thing!'

'Listen to her!' laughed Praskovia. 'Poor Olga, all her arts have failed, therefore she cannot tolerate those of others! Liar, am I? What of you, you hypocrite, who are ready to vow devotion to the Tsar if he would but look at you—why, you have owned as much!—and yet in the next breath you declared that if you should be chosen you would marry the sceptre, not the man; and that if you had a lover before, your marriage should make no difference, for he should be lover still!'

'You lie, minx,' said Olga. 'Speak up, Vera, to-morrow, and give her the lie; save the Tsar from her; he will believe what you say.'

'Let anyone have the Tsar so long as it is not I,' said Vera, 'though it seems to me that each of you is as bad as the other, for neither is honest: you do not love the Tsar, yet you would have him believe that he is adored by you! A sorry wife you would make, either of you!'

'Will you not change your mind as to the Tsar, Vera?' said Praskovia, laughing. 'Remember, he has bidden me ask you this; the choice lies between you and me, for the Tsar will not look at Maria Apraxin; and as for Olga Panief, neither he nor any other man would waste a glance at so sorry a face as hers!'

At this Olga uttered a scream of rage, and,

rushing at her enemy, seized her hand and bit it furiously.

Praskovia cried aloud with the pain, and the blood flowed freely, but Vera tied her handkerchief about the wound and comforted the aggrieved one. 'At any rate, thou art as good as chosen,' she said, 'for thou shalt tell the Tsar that I will neither love him nor consent to marry him; therefore thou art Tsaritsa already, if thou wilt have it so!'

A speech which caused Olga, fuming and panting in her chair, to curse aloud both at Vera and at Praskovia, though she made no more violent attacks upon them.

CHAPTER XXIV

It seems that the Regent Sophia, whom, indeed, some have pronounced to be a wonderful woman for her ability in the management of affairs both great and little—though for my part I give all the credit to Galitsin, who was for ever at her right hand to advise, restrain, and even to speak for her when her Highness lacked words—it seems that Sophia had so far impressed her will upon the Tsar Ivan that he was now willing to be married.

How she performed this magician's trick I am not able to guess ; neither can I say whether any of the ordinary spirit of a man had begun to stir in that poor creature at sight of all the womanly beauty which had been placed before him during those last few days.

It may be that somewhere within him there lurked the unmatured embryo of a man's nature, which had at this time quickened into a kind of half-life, so that he at last consented to gaze with interest upon those fair maidens, and to accept

the idea of matrimony without anger and loathing.

I do not doubt that if Vera had not, in her wisdom, turned from him with disgust, but had feigned admiration for him, and even love, as some of the others did, she could have awakened in him a kind of mild love-ardour which would have been a nearer approach to a man's passion for a woman than any that her sisters awakened in him ; yet it is certain that he accepted Vera's attitude towards him with resignation and turned from her to seek his bride elsewhere without any great show of indignation or of regret.

The morning after Olga's quarrel with Praskovia Soltikof was practically the deciding hour in the matter of Ivan's choice of a bride, and doubtless that quarrel had something to do with the result, though for my part I am persuaded that—Vera not being reckoned as available—he would in any case have chosen as he did.

There entered the *terem* that morning a little procession ot three—the Regent, the Tsar Ivan, and Galitsin.

Maria Apraxin was passed without a glance by the Tsar and by Sophia, but Galitsin stopped and spoke with her. It was his duty to receive

her report, and this day I doubt not she had an interesting one to give.

Meanwhile the Tsar was passing Olga Panief, but Sophia drew him back.

'Glance at this one, *Golúbchick*,' she said; 'she is one you have never well examined, yet she is as beautiful as any, and has the very appearance of a Tsaritsa.'

Ivan glanced at her. 'She frightens me,' he said; 'she has a cruel eye—I like her not. I would rather she were not here.'

'Here is the minx, Vera Kurbatof,' said the Regent, smiling nevertheless kindly upon Vera, and shaking her finger at her; 'she who shrinks from us, Ivan. Dost know why she has done this? Because she knows that a bride is the more valued the more difficult has been her wooing and her winning. Doubt not she pines for thee, *Golúbchick*; she longs to be Tsaritsa and to sit beside thee in the highest seat.'

Vera said not a word, but stood with her eyes upon the floor at her feet.

'Is it so, Vera?' said the Tsar. 'Speak truth and fear not. I would rather choose thee than all the rest, but to me it seems that thou art not willing, thou art afraid of me. When I touched thee thy head swam and thy knees failed; was it not so?'

'It is true, Tsar,' said Vera; 'I fear thee.'

'And why?'

'God knows! I shall always fear thee, and I can never love thee; believe that I am speaking truth.'

'I do believe——' began the Tsar; but Sophia interrupted him.

'See, Vera,' she said, 'it is possible that in knowing the Tsar better and seeing him oftener, this feeling of thine may change for a gentler one. He is kind of heart, believe me, and will make a more indulgent husband than many a man to whom God has given better health and a handsomer face. Ivan loves you the best of all—can you not see it? Come, smile upon him, child, and give him thy hand, and by all the saints or Heaven thou shalt be Tsaritsa in a month, and as fair and as happy a one as ever sat beside a Tsar upon the highest seat.'

'Madam, do not entreat me,' said poor Vera. 'It is the truth that I am afraid of the Tsar; I could not sit beside him. If I were not afraid to death of him I should not have hid myself from him. Do not press me—Tsar, on my knee, I beseech thee. I should be a sorry Tsaritsa that feared the touch and the very sight of thee. Let me go my way; there are those here who long for thee to exalt them to thy side.'

'Bah!' said the Regent, tugging at his arm; 'leave her then, *Golúbchick*, if she insists upon being a fool. If she truly fears thee she will hate thee if we marry thee to her; let her go, fool and minx that she is.'

The Tsar obeyed. He followed his sister, though he turned and gazed at Vera once more as he went.

Then they came to where Praskovia Soltikof stood and waited for them, all blushes, and her splendid eyes ablaze as they sent a speaking glance at the Tsar before screening themselves beneath her marvellous black lashes, long and arched, and lying now upon her cheeks like two lovely fringes of delicate feathered lacework.

Ivan stopped suddenly as his eyes fell upon this picture. He half turned towards Vera as though he would compare the two; but the figure of Praskovia seemed to have captured his gaze, and his eyes remained fixed upon her.

'Holy Mother! there stands a Tsaritsa indeed!' exclaimed Galitsin. 'See, Sophia, such loveliness is surely peerless!'

'Yes, but——' began the Regent, and drew Galitsin aside so that Maria Apraxin (from whom Mazeppa received all that has been told of this scene) could not hear what they said. If one may guess, it is probable that Sophia would much

have preferred Vera for Tsaritsa, partly because the Tsar seemed more attracted by her than by the rest, but chiefly because she fancied that Vera Tsaritsa would be more easily managed than Praskovia Tsaritsa ; for the Regent Sophia did not intend to see the power go from her own hands, and the wife of Ivan should be one who would consent to take the second place in the realm.

But Galitsin had ever the ruling word of these two, and doubtless he persuaded the Regent that matters must go forward now as Ivan would, having gone thus far, and that since Vera was obstinately determined against marriage with him, and he seemed to have accepted her refusal with resignation, the better way now was to encourage him in his obvious admiration for Praskovia. Therefore the two soon returned to the spot where Ivan still stood and gazed, speechless, at Praskovia Soltikof, from whose figure he had not once withdrawn his eyes during these moments of waiting.

'See, her hand is bound up as though it were hurt,' said the Tsar as they joined him. 'What ails her, think you, sister ?'

'Ask her, *Golúbchick*, for yourself. She is not an image of wax, she is warm flesh and blood, made for love and for caresses ; ask her, my dove !'

'What ails thee?' stammered Ivan, blushing to the roots of his hair.

'It is nothing, Tsar,' said Praskovia, glancing at Olga and attempting to hide her hand.

Here Maria Apraxin stepped forward.

'There is a dog in the *terem* that bites, Highness,' she laughed; 'poor Praskovia has been bitten.'

'A dog?' exclaimed Ivan, recoiling—'a dog that bites—he may be mad, sister, let us depart!'

'A dog on two legs was this, Tsar,' said Maria; 'one who is called Olga Panief.'

'What mean you, Maria?' asked Sophia sternly. 'Do you say her hand is bitten, and by this Cossack minx?'

'So it was, Highness. There was a quarrel, which Olga began and ended, began with insult and ended with biting.'

'Fie, Panief!' cried the Regent. 'Go forth, minx, we will have no biters here. Was thy mother a wolf, that thou must tear thy companions with tooth and claw? Shame, wench—go forth, I say!'

'Drive her away quickly, Galitsin, I am afraid of her,' said Ivan whimpering. 'Who can tell? she may turn and bite us all; let her go quickly and return no more!'

Olga left the *terem* in tears, but she turned

at the door and shook her fist at Praskovia and at Maria, neither of whom took any further notice of her.

Then the Regent raised Praskovia's wounded hand and looked at it.

'See the poor wounded hand!' she said. 'See, Ivan, where the cruel teeth went in! How shall we cure it for her?'

'Kiss it with thy lips, Ivan Alexeyevitch!' cried Galitsin with a laugh. 'I warrant that will heal the wound better than all the herbs and medicines the leech can give her!'

'Yes, kiss it, *Golúbchick*!' said Sophia.

And the Tsar obediently, though shyly withal, took the wounded hand and kissed it.

'Oh, Tsar, I am not worthy!' exclaimed Praskovia, sinking on her knees and catching at the edge of his kaftan to raise it to her lips.

But when the Regent bade Ivan kiss Praskovia's forehead and tell her she was the most beautiful of all his maidens, the Tsar's eyes were fixed upon Vera—and this is not to be wondered at, for indeed at this moment she looked so radiantly lovely—in the light, I suppose, of happiness secured—that those who observed her declared they never saw so much beauty in any face as in hers at this moment.

CHAPTER XXV

THOUGH Vera was not actually released from the *terem* for two days after this, there was little talk of any Tsaritsa but Praskovia Soltikof.

The Tsar, though in his foolish, weak way he seemed to regret Vera, grew—it is said—hourly fonder of Praskovia, and by degrees he began to show something of the spirit of a man towards her. This circumstance gave the greatest delight to Sophia, who, said Mazeppa, made no secret of it that she had not expected such good fortune.

'There is the succession to think of,' she explained; 'for you will understand that it would please us better if Ivan should provide an heir rather than that we should depend for succession upon such brats as the young scapegrace at Preobrajensky may raise to himself.'

When Vera was at last allowed to go forth from the *terem* she went straight back to the Diévitchy monastery, but was not received by the new Superior, who declared that she feared the anger of the Regent; therefore she was

obliged to return to her father's house, where she incurred the rage of the old Boyar, who, disappointed of his hopes in her, did not receive her with the kindness of a parent, but rather with the fury of a madman.

But Vera cared little for his rage, seeing that she had escaped the great danger she had feared, and which indeed had at one moment threatened to swamp for ever her happiness.

'And there,' said Mazeppa, ending his tale, 'she is now, thanking God daily for her escape; and Praskovia Soltikof is the chosen Tsaritsa, announced to the people and accepted by the Tsar, who—if I mistake not—will sometimes wish that he had chosen as his poor heart first dictated; for if one thing is more certain than another in this world, it is that his fancy—such as it is—went out to Vera rather than to her who is to be his wife!'

When Mazeppa had finished his tale, I took my leave of him, and, going straight to the Uspensky Cathedral, offered a candle at the shrine of the Blessed Mother of the Lord for the mercy vouchsafed to Vera, and, through her, to me. And on that same day I received a visitor whom I certainly did not expect to see: Olga Panief.

This girl, be it remembered, had treated me very badly. Before my absence upon the Azof

campaign she had professed faithful love for me ; yet when I returned I found that she had thrown me over for the chance of being chosen by the Tsar Ivan. This I might have forgiven, seeing that for an ambitious girl the Tsar's choice is not an opportunity to be lightly put aside. But she had made love with Mazeppa during my absence, upon his own showing, and though she had thrown him over no less than myself, this was nevertheless a crime which I was not prepared to forgive.

Therefore, when I learned that Olga Panief was waiting in the ante-room to see me, I quickly made up my mind that if somehow I could become even with her I would do so. She should yet weep for her treatment of me !

Olga greeted me cordially : we conversed, and she described to me, what I knew already, her nearness to being chosen Tsaritsa.

'If it had not been for the cat Soltikof,' said Olga, 'I should have been chosen ! Oh, the cringing, lying, deceitful minx that she is ! Kill her for me, Chelminsky ; let your sword or your dagger bite well, straight into her heart ; or still better, kill her slowly and with much suffering, curse her ! I might have been Tsaritsa, but for her ! '

'You might also and more certainly have

been the wife of Chelminsky and saved yourself all this trouble and disappointment,' said I. 'From all I hear, Olga Panief, you never had any real chance of being chosen by the Tsar : it rested between Vera Kurbatof and Praskovia Soltikof, but you were never so much as considered by the Tsar—oh ! do not look so crossly, for I know what I speak of ! '

'It is a lie ; but for Soltikof I should have been chosen. Vera Kurbatof, indeed ! Even this fool of a Tsar would not marry so great a fool as Vera ! '

'Well, I admit thou art a splendid woman, Olga. If my heart were of the breaking kind, that would have been a deadly blow when thou didst leave Batourin in my absence for the *terem* of the Tsar, forgetting thy plighted troth to me ! '

'What, the chance to be Tsaritsa, and abandon it because of a word to thee ? Thou must think me a fool indeed, Chelminsky ! '

'And what of certain courting with Mazeppa while the lover was away ? '

'Bah ! Mazeppa ! to dally with Mazeppa means nothing, for every woman is the same to him ; all are toys, to play with and to forget in a day ! Now see here, Chelminsky, kill me this detestable Praskovia and I am still yours, only ten times more than before. I swear I will marry

you at once, and we will go where you please; there, I am serious.'

'And why do you want her killed?' I asked, with difficulty restraining my laughter.

'Because I hate her: is that reason enough? If you will have more, because she has been chosen Tsaritsa over my head; and, last reason, she is my enemy—she has insulted me before the Regent. Is that enough for thee? Come, thy answer?'

'But why should I kill the girl?' I asked. 'What harm has she ever done me?'

'Have I not said that I will marry you for doing me this service? I have asked you to do it because of all men I know I think you are the most to be trusted, and because I believe that you love me well enough to do my will, seeing that the prize offered is one for which any man would surely sell his soul—and that is myself!'

'And thou wilt give thyself, then, to any man who will rid thee of this enemy?'

'I did not say that. I offer the prize to thee, and thee only. Come, look at me well, Chelminsky—am not I worth winning?'

'You may be that—I did not deny or assert anything. I have won thee once and found the prize elusive. Once bitten, I am careful to avoid dogs.'

'This time I should keep my troth: I tell you the other was an exceptional case. A maiden invited to the bride-choosing of the Tsar is not her own mistress; she must go whether she will or no. Come, Chelminsky, am I less to be loved than before? Are my eyes smaller or dimmer? Am I shorter? Is my figure less shapely? Am I not still the kind of maiden for whom a man would barter his soul?'

She came nearer to me and placed her face close to mine, so that I could feel her breath as she spoke. 'Come, Chelminsky, look at me well,' she said; 'am I less than I was?'

'I will tell thee what will surprise thee, Olga,' I said. 'It was none other than I that brought Praskovia Soltikof to the *terem* to overshadow thee in the Tsar's eyes. She is a dear friend of mine, and thou comest to me, of all others, to have her killed!'

'Stay—does she love thee, Chelminsky; art thou her lover?'

'I did not say so. It may be and it may not.'

'Nay, tell me—does she love thee? Oh, if she does, Chelminsky, if she does, I see a better vengeance than her death; she shall live to be jealous. Thou shalt love me again, as before, and marry me. Help me in this, dear Chelminsky.

She has robbed me of the Tsar and insulted me. I shall die if I am not quickly avenged. Tell me, truly, does she love thee ?'

'I think it may well be so,' said I, for this farce amused me and I would see how it should end. 'For one who marries such a husband as Ivan, it is no very great sin to keep a little affection for a handsome lover from the old days !'

'Make sure of her, Chelminsky ; let her love thee madly, and when she is at her maddest thou shalt marry me before her eyes. I will give thee my very soul to do me this service !'

CHAPTER XXVI

I PROMISED Olga to consider this matter, and so prevailed upon her to leave me. When she had gone I gave vent to the laughter which I had with difficulty restrained.

Here was a fury indeed! First she would have her rival killed, then tortured with jealousy, and the prize for either service, herself. Now during the conversation with this woman I had discovered one thing for certain, namely, that I cared not one jot for her fascinations; she no longer had power to move me. The only feeling of which I was conscious in speaking with her was a great desire to give her as sore a heart as she had once given me, could I but devise a way to do so. It was for this reason that I left the decision as it were in doubt, as though I would consider the matter; whereas all I wished was for time to see whether there was any way of turning this new attitude of hers to advantage.

I was not many hours older that day when of a sudden Mazeppa came raging to my lodging, full of a grievance against me.

'Thou hast played a double game, Chelminsky,' said he, looking very evilly at me. 'Explain ; for I trusted thee and thou hast played me false !'

'Explain, rather, thou,' I replied, laughing, 'for I know not how I have offended.'

'It has come to my knowledge,' said Mazeppa, 'that Vera Kurbatof was in sanctuary at the Diévitchy monastery ; that she was placed there by none other than thyself, and that even when I set thee to find her, trusting thee, her hiding place was all the while known to thee, though thou didst make a show of ignorance. See ! Chelminsky, a true friend should not act thus.'

'Bah !—it is nothing, Mazeppa ; you do me injustice. It is true that I placed her in sanctuary—could I have done better on your behalf? As for keeping silence, I was persuaded by Vera to tell no living soul of her hiding place. I had been dogged by some spy, remember, and this—though the rascal came off second best—so alarmed the girl that she bade me behave most cautiously.'

'But you visited her there, my friend, more than once, and even fought—as I am informed—to protect her——'

'Dear Heaven, would you not have done the

same, man? They came to carry her to the *terem*, which was exactly what must at all costs be avoided! I thought to have praise and thanks from you when I should have told my tale, instead of which I am abused as though I had committed a great crime! Truly, Mazeppa, thou art an ungrateful friend, and I am sorry I toiled and bled for thy sake!'

Mazeppa gazed long and fixedly in my face. I knew well what passed in his mind. He was trying to decide whether I was fool or deceiver; whether in reality I had played a double game with Vera, or a simple one as I declared. It was difficult to preserve an even countenance. At length I could bear it no longer, and burst into laughter.

'What ails thee this day, Mazeppa? Why dost thou gaze at me in this solemn fashion? let us have an understanding. What is in thy mind concerning me?'

'I will tell thee what I have thought,' he said. 'I have greatly feared that throughout this matter thy care for Vera Kurbatof has been more for thy own sake than for mine. If it be so, Chelminsky, and thou desirest this wench for thyself, beware what thou dost, for by the saints I shall win in the end.'

'To what purpose is all this talking,' said I, most

innocently ; 'what do I gain by befriending this wench ; what is she to me ? If I have done my best to save her from the *terem*, this has been done at thy own request.'

'Well, I have long suspected thee. Any man might well desire so fair a creature, and it has seemed to me that she is more to thee than thou wouldst have me think. I am determined that none shall possess this maiden but I. Be sure, my friend, that when Mazeppa is resolved upon any matter, that matter is in the end accomplished.'

'Dear heart !' I exclaimed, laughing aloud, 'have the girl for thy own if thou canst—what is she to me ? Only I have done with serving thee in this matter. To be treated thus, and threatened, and what not, after I have toiled and bled in thy cause ! This is ingratitude, Mazeppa, and thy thanklessness shall serve thee ill ; for be sure thou shalt need a friend to help thee before Vera is thine and safely in thy hands ! '

'Well, if I have truly wronged you, I ask pardon. I am in love with the wench, and a man in love is not his own master ; forgive me if I have suspected you foolishly. Continue to be my friend in this, I pray you. You have done excellently, so far ; so well, indeed, that it is your very zeal that has caused me to suspect you of working for yourself and not for me. But stay,

why shall I need a friend now that she is safely out of the *terem*? Are there difficulties that I know not of?'

'There is the old Boyar, her father. Failing her marriage with the Tsar he has, I know, other intentions for her. There is a rich and powerful Boyar, their neighbour in the country, for whom he intends her—an old man.'

'Good, an old man. Ha! then the wench herself will be on our side; we will devise a plan, Chelminsky, and thou shalt help me to carry her away. By the saints, it seems I have wronged thee most foully! The beauty of the girl is my excuse, for truly I do not even now understand how any man can know her and not love her. Lord! when I think of it, I suspect thee still!'

'That is for ever the way of a man when he is fully in love; he must needs suspect that all other men are of the same way of thinking as himself! It is a good thing that men differ in their opinion of a woman. This Vera is certainly fair enough, but to my eyes there are others as fair and fairer. I doubt not my old love will come back to me, now that she has failed to outdo Praskovia Soltikof in the regard of the Tsar. I would punish her for her conduct in throwing me over, but, by the saints, one must forgive her something

for her good looks: she is as splendid as the day, and that is plain truth.'

'Olga Panief you speak of? Yes, she is splendid, and I doubt not she would return to thee; but—shall I deal friendly with thee, Chelminsky?'

'If you will; have I not deserved it?'

'I fear thy anger; well, I will brave it for thy sake. Be careful with this wench Olga, my friend. Do not trust her too much. I have told thee of her violence within the *terem* when she found that the Tsar would choose Praskovia before her. She is a fiend, no less. She is mad with rage and the desire of vengeance. This very day she has avowed her love for me, or rather she has offered me her love upon conditions——'

'Avowed her love for you!' I exclaimed, starting to my feet, as though in fury, though in truth I felt more inclined to laugh than to rage; 'and you dare to tell me this, Mazeppa?'

'Stay, I speak as your friend. "Kill this Praskovia for me," said Olga, "and I am yours," or words to that effect. I bade her depart from me and not speak as a fool and a mad woman. I tell you this for your advantage, that you should not trust her too much.'

'Does she love you, think you, Mazeppa?

Would she have come to you thus but for the hope of persuading you to avenge her ?'

Now, Mazeppa was one who forever believed that every woman must of necessity fall in love with him if he but raised his finger to encourage her, and it is certain that he was generally a successful lover. Even at this moment, when he was very desirous of my friendship and assistance, he could not resist the delight of hinting that he had made a conquest of Olga.

'If she loves me it matters little, for I vow that she shall have no encouragement from me, my friend, now that I know you still desire her. I doubt not that you will win her, but, as I say, trust her not too much. Now, as to Vera Kurbatof, of whom you have lately seen more than I, have you spoken to her of me ; is she inclined, think you, to my suit ?'

'I have scarcely spoken of you. She is aware that you would have befriended her. You have told me the truth as to Olga ; shall I be equally frank as to Vera ?'

Mazeppa looked astonished, then somewhat angry ; but he bade me speak on.

'I have been so good a friend to her and served her so well,' said I, 'that it would be wonderful if so gentle a maid were not grateful——'

'Grateful, well,' interrupted Mazeppa; 'but dare not tell me there is more than gratitude. By heaven, Chelminsky, if, after all, you have fooled me and have sought to gain this maiden's love——'

'Oh, oh! I have sought nothing; if she is grateful and her gratitude has inclined her to bestow upon me a certain sweet friendly kindness which might, I admit, one day develop into a warmer regard, am I to blame? I speak as a friend. I have not wooed her back; take her and win her, Mazeppa, if thou wilt, and if she will also!'

'A pretty confession to make indeed!' cried Mazeppa, striding angrily about the room, too furious to perceive that his own admission had been the very same. 'By the saints, I know not whether to trust thee or no! I know not whether thou art most fool or knave!'

Truly love had made of Mazeppa himself for the time being more fool than knave! Never was this old fox less of a fox than on this day! Well, he had called me fool before the Tsar Peter, assuring his Highness that I was too great a fool to make a Cossack Hetman. We should see who was the greater fool to-day, he or I; for indeed I had a plan in my mind to make so great a fool of him that he should remember for evermore how he had miscalled me!

CHAPTER XXVII

During the next two days I matured the plan which should give me the laugh over both of those who had offended me. I am a bad forgiver, and when I have a debt to pay, I like to return to the lender more rather than less than I have received from him. I counted up my grievances against Mazeppa and against Olga Panief. Mazeppa had called me fool before the Tsar Peter, and had tried to set him against me. He had made love to Olga, while I believed her to be true to me, and had allowed her to go to the *terem*—all this during my absence ; he had had me dogged by a spy, and had lied to me ; lastly, he would have Vera Kurbatof by fair means or foul—a deadly grievance in my eyes, for none should have her but I.

As for Olga's sins against me—well, she had flouted me at Batourin ; and now—though she had come to offer herself to me, she had gone first to Mazeppa—Lord ! there was grievance enough against both ; I should have no pity.

Olga Panief came to see me again, and by her

foolishness helped much to carry forward that which I had in my mind.

She desired to know whether I had seen Praskovia Soltikof—the chosen Tsaritsa—whether she had concealed her love for me or revealed it—was I sure of her passion for me, and I know not what foolishness besides. As for me, I thought it no wrong to deceive her. I answered her that there could be little doubt of Praskovia's love, for, though I had seen her this day in the very presence of the Regent and of the Tsar Ivan, at whom she scarcely glanced, she had not hesitated to send me more than once a splendid flash from her eyes whose import was unmistakable.

This praise of her rival's eyes infuriated Olga.

'Fool that I was,' she cried, 'I should have poisoned the minx in the *terem* while I had the chance, before she could set the Regent and the Tsar against me. How easily it might have been done—and I never thought of it! Now there is only this way of revenge. You still love me, Chelminsky—come, do you not? I am as fair as I ever was—is it not so?'

'Oh, as fair, and fairer; that is not to be denied. You are a beautiful woman, Olga; what man could gaze upon you and his pulses not beat the faster?'

'Well—well, I am yours, if you will. I have always preferred you above the rest, at Batourin or elsewhere, though I have loved to live gaily and to hear the flattery of men ; come, you shall have me, you shall marry me here in Moscow, when you will, and then you shall tell Soltikof, or, better still, I shall tell her myself that I have carried off her lover. Does the fool think she shall have the Tsar and thee too ?'

'There is a difficulty, but only one,' I said, as if perplexed. 'I was sent for this day by the Regent, not as an honoured guest, but in order to be examined and threatened. Her Highness has discovered in some way that it was I who concealed Vera Kurbatof in order that she might escape the bride-choosing ; for this I am in deep disgrace, and under orders to leave Moscow immediately.'

'Ah, never doubt it, this is not the true reason, this about Vera Kurbatof! The Regent is a fox, and she has seen that Praskovia Soltikof loves thee ; this is the cause of thy disgrace. Oh, good, good ! '

'Well, it may be so,' I said, adopting Olga's idea, since it fitted well enough into my own fiction. 'At any rate, I must go or remain in disguise. Therefore, if we marry we must marry

in disguise, though, indeed, I see no particular objection to that.'

'Stay, let me think. No, it matters little. So it shall be. Afterwards I will go to her and will bid her wish me joy of my marriage : she will ask me the name of my lover, and oh ! the telling her will atone for much—how she will pale and gasp with rage ! Well, then, so be it, dear Chelminsky ; fix the hour and the place, and so it shall be ! '

So far and so good for my plan, which prospered well. Only let Mazeppa behave as foolishly as Olga, which in his present state he seemed likely to do, and the matter would go smoothly enough.

Mazeppa was sick with love at this time : a sick fox with all his foxiness gone out of him !

When I told Mazeppa of the rich Boyar who was ready to marry Vera Kurbatof if the Tsar should not choose her, I told him the truth as I had heard it from Vera's own lips. She would no more marry this man than the Tsar, she had said ; and I had promised to help her in this as in the other matter. Now I determined this trouble of the Boyar should help me in my present designs. I therefore visited Mazeppa, who had left me yesterday in anger.

'Mazeppa, I will not quarrel with thee, my friend,' I said, 'and to prove my good will, listen to what I have to tell thee. Vera is in trouble about this Boyar. She has asked me for help, but the only way for her out of this quandary is by marrying. This I told her, when I soon perceived that if I would she would be prepared to marry myself rather than stay to be mated with this fat old Boyar. Then it occurred to me that here was an opportunity sent by Providence itself for your convenience. For since I do not desire to marry the wench, while you are sick with love for her, what should be simpler than that you pass for me, and so carry her conveniently away?'

'Fool! she would know me,' growled Mazeppa; 'you speak foolishly for jest.'

'No, it is no jest, it is a good plan; nevertheless, if you like it not, leave it and the girl also; what is it to me? I am sorry I took the trouble to think out so good a scheme for a lover whose ardour is not equal to the trouble of carrying it out.'

I made a show of departing, but Mazeppa called me back.

'Stop,' he said; 'maybe I spoke hastily. I could, of course, wear disguise——'

'You must do that in any case, and she also,

for safety's sake,' said I. 'She is well known, and might be recognised by the priest.'

'She will hate me for deceiving her in this way; for, if what you say is true, it is you she desired to wed.'

'Bah! a woman soon forgives such things, especially when the other—that is I in this case—has deceived her. Moreover, she would not marry me for love, though we are good friends; it is rather the desire to escape this fat Boyar than to gain me. The wench is driven distracted, first by the danger at the *terem*, now by this. I have left the matter open in case it should please you to do as I suggest, for I shall not do myself as she wishes. If you agree, it is easy for me to return and tell her that I have decided to marry her rather than let the Boyar have her.'

Mazeppa considered awhile.

'I would rather she married me of her knowledge and free will, which no doubt I should have gained with opportunity; but, as you know, I have determined to possess this woman, and if she is not to be had one way, she must be secured another way.'

'That is wisdom,' I said. 'Do you know a priest who will not ask questions, but will be ready to marry a disguised pair and pocket his fee without desiring to know too much?'

'I know the very man!' exclaimed Mazeppa, growing obviously more in love with my plan as it became more familiar to his imagination. 'I will go forth and settle with him at once, Chelminsky; why should we wait? The girl is in danger. I have no more business in Moscow. By the saints, I will wed her to-morrow and we shall travel together to the Ukraine! After all, my son, you have done well by me!'

CHAPTER XXVIII

MAZEPPA was of opinion next day that, since he must be married in disguise, it would be well to have a witness both on his own side and upon the lady's. 'And since you, naturally, will not do,' he laughed, 'it so happens that young Shedrine the Cossack is in town and will do well for the office.' Shedrine would do excellently, and since he had come as the envoy of Samoilovitch, the Hetman, bidding Mazeppa return quickly to his duties, the marriage was opportune indeed.

'As to a witness for Vera,' said Mazeppa; 'has she one, or will Olga Panief serve? Olga has not quarrelled with Vera, I believe, but with the Soltikof maiden.'

With difficulty I restrained an exclamation.

'You have not mentioned the matter to Olga?' I said anxiously.

'Not I—there is no soul who has learned of it from me.'

'Good! I do not think Olga will do; she is not so discreet as some, and might gabble.'

'Well, find whom you will, and settle your time with her; then I can tell the priest and my witness, and within twenty-four hours we shall be married.'

So I settled with Olga for the evening, telling Mazeppa the time arranged: and so I left my two innocents to their fate.

And since I had no desire to be suddenly fallen upon and perhaps murdered in my sleep by the enraged pair when they should have awakened to the true state of affairs and the pretty jumble they had made of matters, I removed myself into a new lodging, nearer the house of the Boyar Kurbatof; for now that my enemies were out of the way I intended to lay a more definite siege to the heart of my most beautiful Vera.

Nevertheless I lay hid for two days, and when I did go forth I went armed, and almost the first person I met in the street was the young Cossack Shedrine whom Mazeppa had suggested as witness.

I hoped he would pass me by without recognition, but he saw me, and as though involuntarily his hand went to his sword, but it wandered away again.

'Well, this is a pretty trick you have played,' he said. 'What was your object, Chelminsky, may I be bold to inquire?'

'A matter of high politics which you are too

young to understand, Shedrine ; therefore I will not explain.'

'As you will,' he said, 'but beware how you meet Mazeppa, and still more be careful of Olga Panief : she is a mad woman, my friend. It was hard upon Mazeppa to marry him to a wild, witless thing like Olga.'

'Bah ! She is sane enough, but she is angry. She is jealous of the Tsaritsa-elect, by whose arts she imagines that she was forestalled. But tell me, did the marriage pass off without interruption ?'

'Assuredly ; they were married. I have seen many a quarrelsome pair, but save me from such another married couple as this !'

'Tell me, tell me, Shedrine !' I exclaimed. 'Tell me quickly : I perish to hear all.'

'Well, the ceremony was performed by the priest, I being witness and bridegroom's attendant —some old frump sent by you, I believe, was her witness. It seems Mazeppa believed he was marrying one Vera Kurbatof, and Olga thought that her disguised husband was yourself. It appears also that you are the delinquent in this matter from first to last : at any rate, both parties cursed you well, and it is you upon whom they have vowed vengeance.'

'But stay, Shedrine, you go too fast. Is Mazeppa in Moscow, and is she ? Are they

together as man and wife? Do they recognise the rite performed over them? How and when did they discover the mistake?'

'Mazeppa is in Moscow, so is Olga: they are not together, nor have been since the first half-hour of marriage. They both deny the marriage, which is nevertheless a marriage, and they discovered the "mistake" as soon as they were out of the church, when Olga threw off her disguise, saying that Chelminsky might wear his if he chose, but for her there was no reason. Then Mazeppa suddenly uttered a great curse, and, tearing his own wraps from his face, glared at her and she back at him. Then Olga, with a yell which may have been intended for spoken words, but was not so understood by me, flew at her newly-won husband and struck at him so fiercely that Mazeppa actually drew his sword.

'"Do not kill her, Mazeppa," cried I. "Do you not see that she has been duped as well as you?"

'"Let the shrieking fool keep her distance then and be quiet," he said, furious with rage, "or by all the devils I will spit her as she deserves. Are you mad that you have played this trick upon me, you she-devil?" he cried—never was man so furious—"Who bade you put your pestilent self in place of the other wench?"

'"What other wench?" she shrieked back. "It is you that shall be spitted, you cheat and liar, for playing me this trick: be not deceived, your sword shall not for ever protect you, as now!"

'Then Mazeppa turned upon me. "What in the devil's name does this mean, Shedrine?" he said. "How did this she-devil come here? Is it a trick of Chelminsky's?"

'"I know nothing," said I. "I have not seen Chelminsky, and know not what he may have or may not have to do with it."

'Then both cursed, and she shrieked, and the horrors of death and judgment were heaped by both upon your head; and Olga Panief grew so mad in her rage that I was obliged with Mazeppa's help to gag her—no easy matter, be sure: after which Mazeppa procured a *kibitka* and had her carried away, Heaven knows where. It is not for me to interfere between man and wife, therefore I have not been near him since; and indeed I am not anxious to meet either of them unless they shall have calmed down into reasonable human beings. Olga will certainly kill you if she can, my friend; and as for Mazeppa, you are rash to make an enemy of him, as I thought you should have known!'

'That is my affair, Shedrine: I am not afraid

of Mazeppa. For the rest, I do but pay old scores upon both. Thanks for the warning, however : I shall go with open eyes and ears ! '

This I did for several days, but ran into no danger that I knew of, and at the end of the third day I saw her for whose sake I lingered in Moscow, and ran unknown risks for the great desire to catch sight of her face and to hear her voice—Vera.

I saw her come from the house in the charge of her old nurse ; and when Vera at the same instant caught sight of me she sent the old woman back within doors upon some pretext, and while she was absent my beloved took the opportunity to walk with me down the street, for, she said, 'I have much to say.'

Then Vera told me that she was in great trouble both with the old Boyar and with Mazeppa, who, for the last three days, had been constantly in the house proffering his suit against that of the rich Boyar Astashof.

'*Mazeppa !*' I exclaimed, 'does he dare——'

'He both dares and, I fear, he progresses well with his suit. He has become very friendly with my father, declaring that as Hetman of the Cossacks—which he vows he will be before many years, or perhaps months, are out—he will rank but little below the kings of the earth ; therefore,

says Mazeppa, he is not a suitor to be quickly denied.'

'At any rate, I can prove that Mazeppa, whether Hetman or braggart, is no fitting suitor for thy hand, Vera,' I said, laughing, 'for he is married already!'

Then I told her the story of my trick upon these two; and at my manner of paying off old scores Vera could not help laughing, though she expressed herself alarmed on my account.

'Both are dangerous enemies,' she said, 'and of a kind to hesitate at no act of vengeance, however terrible. For the love of Christ, Chelminsky, be careful,' she ended, 'how you go and how you meet either.'

'If you care that I should be watchful, I will watch,' said I; but Vera did not reply, only dropping for a moment her eyes.

'Now I understand,' she continued presently, 'why Mazeppa has spoken so bitterly of you during these days. You are forbidden the house, you must know. He has informed my father that it was none but you who concealed and befriended me at the Diévitchy; who even fought and bled to prevent my being taken to the *terem*. For this my father will no longer have your name spoken.'

'And meanwhile you are in danger once

again. What can I do, Vera? How shall I help you?'

'Tell me quickly where I may find you. Here is the *nyanka* returning; she must not see me with you.'

I told Vera where I lodged, and we parted suddenly, for the old woman came scolding up to meet her. From far down the road my charmer sent me a wave of the hand, and I stood and cursed the old hag who had come too soon between me and heaven!

CHAPTER XXIX

VERA's news disquieted me much. To know that Mazeppa was daily at her house poisoning her father's mind against me was not pleasant knowledge. And I was to be refused admittance! Well, I could scarcely expect the Boyar, her father, to be greatly pleased with me since he had learned of my conduct in taking Vera's part against his commands.

As I came near my lodgings that evening someone suddenly ran out from the shadow of a house and made a wild swoop at me with a knife. She was muffled to the eyes, but I should have guessed it was Olga Panief even if she had not spoken.

I easily avoided the blow, and, catching her wrist, compelled her to drop the weapon.

'Now, you fury,' I said, 'we are equals for the jilting at Batourin. In future you will think twice before treating an honest love in such fashion: I loved you and meant honestly by you. Will you promise that you will leave me in peace henceforward?'

'Not I; you are not fit to live, cheat and liar! I shall kill you at sight at the first opportunity.'

'There may be no opportunity. I have heard you say such things that if I were to report them you should be knouted into your grave before you were many hours older. Have you forgotten bidding me slay the Tsaritsa-elect, your rival, for no better reason than jealousy?'

'No one would believe such as you,' she snapped; 'you have no proofs.'

'You made the same proposal to Mazeppa. He will be glad to witness you out of the world; as his wife you are a tie to him.'

She struggled furiously at these words, but I would not let her go, and upon her knife I placed my foot for safety.

Then she began to scream like a mad woman, calling me shameful and dreadful names, and vowing that not only I should die, but also the Tsaritsa-elect and Mazeppa, and I know not who else besides.

At the noise a body of Streltsi came up, ten men, to inquire what the noise meant.

Olga was subdued at sight of them, and looked sullenly as they approached; but she stopped her screaming and waited.

The leader asked me what in the fiend's name was all the noise they had heard.

'It is my poor sister here,' I explained, 'who suffers from paroxysms of madness, of which one has just passed over her.'

'Then see that she behaves quietly, or she shall find there is authority in Moscow.'

They withdrew laughing and talking among themselves.

'I will tell them the truth next time, Olga,' I said; 'I swear it!—therefore take heed what you do.'

'Next time I may make a better stroke,' said Olga sullenly. 'I am determined that you shall not live; you are not fit, neither is Praskovia Soltikof. We shall see whether they who offend me shall laugh or weep!'

With that she withdrew and disappeared, the poorer by her dagger, which I carried away with me.

Afterwards I wished I had allowed the Streltsi to take the fool, for, though I fear not the open assault of men, it is different to know that there is a mad and furious woman at large who may rush out upon one at any moment. Such knowledge is apt to make a coward of a brave man.

Soon after this a message reached me from

Vera Kurbatof. It was written, and I spelled it out with difficulty, being but a moderate *gramatny* or scholar. The message ran, 'I am in danger again ; come at noon to-morrow.'

This message filled me with joy, for I longed hourly to see the maiden. Never up to this day had woman taken such hold upon my heart ; all other loves of my life had been but surface scratches, but this time I was sore wounded. I was in that foolish state when there is no rest except the beloved is at hand.

I went disguised ; for, since I was to be denied admittance in my own name, it was useless, I thought, to attempt it or to force it. Therefore I borrowed the dress of a *Raznóschick*, a fellow who carries a covered tray of cakes for sale. Such dealers are admitted, I knew, into the apartments of the ladies, who buy largely of their wares.

I spoke with the doorkeeper, bidding him obtain for me the permission of the Barishnya to enter the ladies' quarter with my cakes, since she and her women were old customers of mine.

The man parleyed, and there was talking and arguing, and in the midst a man entered from the street behind me. I took no notice, being intent upon obtaining access to Vera, parleying and quarrelling with the doorkeeper.

Suddenly the new arrival placed his arms tightly round my own from behind, so that—being both held by him and hampered by my cake-tray, I could not move.

'A *Raznóschick's* dress does not conceal Chelminsky's voice,' said one, whose tone I recognised in a moment for Mazeppa's. 'I have thee, my friend, at last. Go quickly, you porter, and fetch others to help. Shout for them to come!—this is a rascal in disguise, a cut-throat, a robber; be sure he's come for no good!'

With a cry of horror the doorkeeper flung himself to the end of the hall, where he rang a bell and shouted names. I struggled, but could obtain no purchase for my efforts, which were useless.

Four or five men were quickly upon the scene. Mazeppa addressed them with authority.

'Take this bad character and carry him to the flog-room. I will see the Boyar and obtain permission for his knouting.'

'Do not get me knouted, Mazeppa,' I said; 'take your sword, rather, and run me through!' Then I added, recovering dignity, 'The Boyar will never dare knout a free Cossack, of family as good as his own, and ten times better than yours!'

Mazeppa replied not a word; but he bade

the fellows tie me tight, for, said he, 'He is a desperate character, and the house is not safe with him in it!'

So here was I locked up in the flog-room, and with the prospect of a knouting before me: a terrible and intolerable disgrace for one of my rank, and Vera as far off as ever, if not more hopelessly removed from me than before.

I was bound hands and feet; if they came to knout me I could make no resistance. I know not exactly how long I awaited my fate; the moments crawled maggot-slow. If I were knouted and survived the shame, I told myself, I should never speak to Mazeppa if we met face to face; I should strike out at sight; neither should I take any rest until I had killed him or he me.

I suppose but a few minutes had in reality passed by — though the maggot-footed time seemed to be the beginning of Eternity—when at length steps approached, and my heart stood still to await my doom.

There entered Mazeppa and one other—a burly, middle-aged man, a wealthy Boyar by his furred and jewelled kaftan — Vera's father, Kurbatof.

'So this is the fellow that did his best to defeat my wishes by keeping Vera from the *terem*? Why did you this, sir?' said the Boyar.

I decided to speak boldly. 'Because I desired her for myself, Boyar. What manner of a husband would the Tsar be for such as your daughter? She should marry a man, not a plaster figure!'

'And who in the devil's name are you, then?' said old Kurbatof, astonished at my boldness.

'I own to as good a name as even your own —Chelminsky. It is one of the best of our Cossack names; not like Mazeppa's there, which he picked up Heaven knows where—no Cossack knows it! I am a better suitor than he, Boyar. He tells you doubtless that he will be Hetman; but it is also possible that I shall be so, and not he; for I have a Tsar behind me, and he a Regent. Moreover,' I added, suddenly inspired, 'Mazeppa is already married: this I can prove.'

'Oh—oh!' exclaimed the Boyar.

'It is so,' I persisted, 'even though he deny it.'

Mazeppa seemed too startled and astonished to speak. The Boyar looked to him for an explanation.

'It is a lie, Boyar!' he stammered at length.

'Bah!' said Kurbatof, 'lying is a sin and forbidden by God; which of you is lying?'

'At any rate, I can bring witnesses,' said I. 'Let me go, Boyar; I am no common fellow

to be kept bound in a knout-room ; this is an indignity.'

'Nevertheless, you have wronged this household, and ought to be punished. A man of your rank may not be knouted, but I will consider what should be done. Do you say Mazeppa is already married ?'

'As I can easily prove.'

'Well, I will question you again. In the meantime you shall remain where you are.'

With which the Boyar left me, beckoning Mazeppa after him, who—I doubt not—flooded him with a torrent of fierce denials in contradiction of my statement, so that I know not whether I should soon have escaped from my prison, but that the door suddenly opened, and who but Vera should appear.

She beckoned me to silence ; then she removed my bonds and showed me a way out of the house by a side door. When we stood safely without she explained that she had sent for me because she greatly mistrusted Mazeppa. Her father was inclined to let her marry the rich Russian Boyar rather than the Cossack adventurer, and, said Vera, 'if he so decides, I do not trust Mazeppa.'

'What do you fear ?' I asked.

'He will not take no for an answer. If he

cannot have me by fair means, he will secure me by foul.'

Exactly the words Mazeppa himself had once used in speaking of his intention with regard to Vera.

'Then you would have me keep a watch upon him?' said I, and Vera begged me with brimming eyes to watch her father's house as a cat listens at a mouse-hole, closing never an eye.

CHAPTER XXX

THE Kurbatof mansion lay in a suburb of the city: it was a large wooden house, horse-shoe shaped, like most of the houses of the richer inhabitants in the outskirts of Moscow. There was a gardener's room or hut at the great gate, and because it would be difficult to watch Vera's home from the street, since there was no house opposite, and only a road deep in filth, without pavement to stand upon or any place behind in which to shelter oneself, I thought it better to make a friend, if I could, of the gardener or his wife—for the whole family of brats as well as their parents herded in the little hut at the gate, the atmosphere of which, within doors, was terrible to a Cossack nose and lungs, accustomed to the fresh air and much exposure.

I therefore provided myself with *pränniki* for the children and presented myself at the gate at dusk. The good folks bowed low as to a Barin, and were for opening the great gate to let me in; but I informed them, to their surprise, that I only desired to see the Barishnya Vera when she

should pass this way upon her morning walk. My mission, I said, was so private that I dare not go to the house to see her. 'You will find, when the Barishnya sets eyes upon me, that I am a welcome guest!' I added, smiling. 'I desire her no harm, nor yet anyone, unless it be her enemies.'

The man scratched his head.

'Are you known to the Boyar?' he asked.

'I am known to the Boyar,' I replied, 'and I have, moreover, for those who serve me kindly—this!'

I showed a silver rouble, at which he looked greedily.

'And who are these enemies the Barin speaks of?' the man asked cautiously. 'Can so beautiful, so adorable a Barishnya have enemies?'

'You will see, if you allow me to abide a while here, that she both has enemies and that if necessary her friends—as myself—should be constantly on the watch at this time, lest they do her an injury.'

'Do her an injury?' squealed the gardener's wife with fury. 'The rascals! The villains! Would you have her enemies do our Barishnya an injury, Vaiseuk? Let this Barin do as he desires, I say; he will put her upon her guard. Take the rouble and let him come in!'

'Peace, Masha, fool!' said Vaiseuk. 'Well,

give me the rouble,' he continued, holding out his hand. 'The Barishnya shall see you from a safe distance as she passes out, and we shall soon know if you are friend or enemy!'

Thus I was able to take up the best of positions, and old Vaiseuk was soon justified in his confidence in me; for when Vera passed out and caught sight of me, she gave an exclamation of such joyful surprise that he quickly found I was indeed the friend I had declared myself.

'You see I am here, Vera, and here shall remain until you tell me I need watch no longer,' I said. 'Tell my good friend Vaiseuk to let me be his guest and to keep his mouth shut.'

Vera joyfully did so. 'This is my best of friends,' she explained, 'who has saved me from much misery already, and is now busy in my service.'

'*Dooshinka*,' exclaimed the man's wife, 'what enemies can you have? Do not all people love you?'

'Perhaps some whom she would rather unlove her, Matushka,' I laughed. 'Some there are who love her so well that they would carry her from her home!'

'Oh, oh!' said the old woman. 'Save her from such, Barin, and all the saints will bless you!'

Thus I was established in my watch tower, and there for two whole days and nights I lived, and a third day, and during all that time, though many visitors came and went, I never saw Mazeppa.

'Which means this,' thought I: 'he has given up hope of the fair means, and will trust to the foul to effect his purpose, which of course is the stealing of Vera!' And, sure enough, on the evening of the third day I saw Mazeppa. He came at dusk, and stayed but a few moments at the house; then he returned and departed as stealthily as he had come.

Now I must watch indeed, thought I, for it may well be he came to make his final arrangements, having friends or a friend within who will carry out his designs, whatsoever they may be!

And when night fell, and the gardener and his family snored in concert, I heard the rumble of some kind of light *dormése* or travelling carriage in the road without. The horses pulled up within twenty paces of the great gates and there remained, impatiently pawing the mud, shaking themselves, and making the usual noises of waiting horses.

No man spoke, excepting occasionally to utter a curse or a word when one of the animals

became fidgety. This was not Mazeppa's voice ; if he was there he remained silent.

Half an hour passed, and another half, and at last I heard stealthy sounds from the direction of the house. A door was softly opened, and steps came towards the gate. Then in the dim light of the stars I perceived two men carrying a burden ; but since neither sound nor movement came from it, this could not be Vera nor any other living being ; therefore, I thought, I must be mistaken by a coincidence, for some thief or thieves within the household have chosen this night for carrying away some of the Boyar's property—a matter which concerns me not at all so long as it be not his daughter.

I crept softly from the hut, keeping in the shadow, and watched the two fellows place their bundle within the carriage that awaited them. In this carriage there was but one man besides the driver : this fellow received their burden from the other two, who then returned to the house. The driver shook his reins and the horses started.

A common piece of night stealing and no more, and I had hoped for Heaven knows what to happen—something by which I might exalt myself and abase Mazeppa, and at the same time add another point to my credit with the fair Vera,

with whom I must stand ever higher and higher and Mazeppa lower and lower.

Then this thought suddenly occurred to me: What if the fox Mazeppa should have arranged this matter after some devil's way of his own devising? If this burden should, after all, be Vera herself, gagged or drugged, or what not—and he, not desiring to run into danger himself, be waiting somewhere to join the party, once the danger is over!

And now that this idea had entered my brain it speedily overmastered every other thought.

Fool that I had been to be so easily gulled, and faithless watchman! Oh! if Mazeppa had bettered me and had indeed carried Vera away!

The rumble of the carriage wheels was still audible, though now at some distance away; at any rate, I might follow and note, at least, which road was taken from the city; then I could run for my horse and pursue.

So off went I down the road at full run, and, going as I was at full speed, I gained upon the horses, as I could tell by the sound.

Suddenly the rumble ceased — they had stopped; they were about, I guessed, to pick up Mazeppa, who waited in safety while others undertook the dangerous portion of his enterprise—the fox! If only I could overtake the

carriage before it recommenced its journey! I made desperate efforts. I rushed into the street called Troitsky just in time to come close to a large *dormêse* as the wheels began to move and the horses to strain at the traces.

I almost shrieked aloud in Mazeppa's name to stop, but remembered in time that would be a false move; for assuredly, if he should hear me call to him, he would drive the faster.

But I was in desperate straits, for my breath was almost spent, and, though I followed still, I felt not only that I lost ground, but that I must soon cease to move even as rapidly as now, for I was utterly exhausted.

CHAPTER XXXI

One of the city gates lay in this direction : that which gave upon the road leading to our own home, the Ukraine. I must at least make sure that Mazeppa intended to take this road. That much ascertained I might rest a little while, or even, perhaps, return for my horse.

Meanwhile the rumble of the wheels in front of me grew fainter with distance ; if it had not been night time, and this the only sound audible, I should have lost it long since.

Suddenly I did lose it. Either they were already at the gate and had stopped to be allowed to pass out by the sleepy custodian, or I had fallen out of the range of earshot.

I made a last effort, using all my remaining strength to cover a few hundred yards in case they should be delayed at the gate, and presently I was rewarded by hearing the carriage wheels once more, this time much nearer.

But I could run no further. I staggered forward at a walk and reached the gate ; the noise of the wheels had passed out of hearing.

A drowsy peasant in a cart drawn by a little horse which walked in its sleep, according to the custom of these little Finnish or Russian ponies, had just passed into the city. This man sulkily informed me that some Barin had just passed out in his travelling carriage. To the gatekeeper he had given his destination as Kief.

Then I stood and thought for a moment, and as the result of my reflections I hastened homewards for my horse, old Boris, who would carry me to the Ukraine at a gallop if I but shook the reins and laid them upon his neck.

But my lodgings were a long way from this part of the city, and it was nearly an hour before I was back again at the gate and after my quarry. That would matter little if I could keep upon their track; but Mazeppa, being a fox, would employ every device to set possible pursuers at their wit's end. Therefore I concluded that whichsoever of the many branching roads he might have chosen for his flight it would not be the Kiefsky road, since he had given that city as his destination.

Yet even in this Mazeppa showed wheels within wheels of subtlety, for it proved in the end that he had actually done that which anyone knowing him would suppose to be the most unlikely thing of all, having selected the very road which he had named. And it must be confessed that he

thus completely outwitted me, for I spent all that first night in galloping desperately down one road and then another, finding no trace of the fugitives anywhere ; and when, at morning, it was necessary to give Boris a rest, I was no wiser as to their whereabouts than I had been when I left the gates of Moscow last night.

But Boris and I were used to hard work together, and we rested but a few hours before recommencing our search. Suffice to say that forty-eight priceless hours had been wasted in fruitless ridings forward and backward before I felt sure that we were at last upon the right track.

'Now for a long and hard gallop, Boris, my friend,' said I, patting his neck, and away went the good horse upon a scent nearly two days old, and lo ! to my surprise and delight, on the third night I ran into the quarry.

It was at midnight that we rode up to a post-house upon the Kiefsky road. I did not expect more than news of the fugitives : they had passed, I should be told, so many hours before ; yet when the night groom came forward to take my orders he began by telling me, if I desired the *nochliog*, or night's rest, I must sleep in the stable, for wonderful things were happening here.

'Never mind the wonderful things, fool ; tell me quickly how long since there passed a *dormése*

containing a man and a woman, besides the driver ?'

'It has not passed at all,' said the fellow, grinning and scratching his head, 'because it is still here !'

'Come into the stable quickly !' I said, fearful lest he should be heard, supposing that this wondrous thing were really true. 'Now,' I continued, when we had entered the horse-shed and closed the door, 'tell me what you were going to say at first.'

'The man is sleeping in the travelling carriage because the woman has barricaded herself in the post-room ; this is the second night : the post-master argues and scolds all day, but it is useless. "If he tries to come in here," says the woman, "he shall be killed !" As for the man, he laughs and says, "We shall see what will happen when her stomach craves for food !" "God knows," says the master, "how it will end !"'

'That I will soon show you, my friend,' said I, 'for I have come to end it !'

I hastened to the post-room. 'If you don't wish to be slit in two halves or have your brains set flowing, go not near that mad thing,' said the groom. 'Lord ! you should hear her cry out at the other !'

Disregarding his warnings, to his great alarm

I knocked at the door of the post-room, saying it was I, Chelminsky, come to deliver her.

'Ah,' said Vera's voice from within, 'it is that devil, assuming Chelminsky's voice. I am not so easily deceived, Mazeppa!'

'It is indeed I, Vera,' said I joyously. 'I have followed you with difficulty, but I have found you at last.'

'Oh!' cried she from within, 'it sounds like Chelminsky; but dare I open and risk it? Remember, if it is you, Mazeppa, you devil, that if you touch me you die—I swear it again and again.'

'How shall I prove it to you that I am I?' said I in despair. 'I was watching in Vaiseuk's hut and saw you carried out by night. Is that proof?'

Then Vera opened the door a little and peeped out, and with a cry of joy she threw it open and fell upon me with tears and embraces, which latter I returned with interest, being the first I had given or received from this modest and splendid maiden.

'Now, shut yourself up once again, for I shall first settle accounts with Mazeppa,' said I. 'In case he should better me, you will be worse off than before!'

'No, I will see this account settled,' she said;

and when I bade her take her sword or her pistol, or whatsoever it was she had had with her in the room—that with which she threatened to take his life if he should have attempted the door—she told me to my surprise that she had nothing!

'Threats are good weapons against some foes,' she said, laughing!

Nevertheless I gave Vera my own dagger, for I liked not that she should be unarmed, in case of accident, and bade her keep it in her bosom.

Then we went to find Mazeppa in his *dormése*, wherein he slept soundly.

'Awake, Mazeppa,' I cried, 'for I am here!'

He opened his eyes and saw me, saw Vera also; yet he did not become confused or show terror or surprise even in the moment of waking.

'What, you, Chelminsky,' he said, 'and come so far after this baggage? Well, take her, my friend, if you think her worth the having; as for me, I have changed my opinion!'

'I shall certainly take her,' said I, 'and that without your permission; but first you shall fight me——'

'What, for her sake? Dear man! believe me, she is not worth it: I have spent three days in her company, and it is enough. If you are wise, let the fat Russian Boyar have her. We

were right to save her from the puling little Tsar! They two would breed devils and idiots to rule Russia withal!'

'Fie, Mazeppa,' said I, 'a Cossack and a coward!'

'Lord, man, you know better than that! I like you, Chelminsky; we are old friends. I nearly got you knouted the other day, but I was angry; I wanted the wench here, knowing no better. Now it is different. I will not fight on her account—the she-devil! I have scratches upon me from her nails, and kicks from her feet. Another day I will fight, if you will, upon somewhat better pretext.'

'Get out of the *dormése*, then,' I said, 'for I require it for this lady.'

'What!' said he, climbing out nevertheless, 'you will not be advised? Let her go, man, and come back with me: I know her better than you. I have had some experience with women.'

'Mazeppa, the married man!' Vera laughed suddenly.

'True,' said he, 'there is that little affair, too, Chelminsky: some day we may exchange a few passes, but not to-night. It is scarcely worth a man's while to be wakened—much less to be obliged to draw a sword—upon so trifling a matter as the destination of a scolding woman.

Take her, man, or let her go to the devil : as for me, I shall sleep.'

With these words Mazeppa withdrew to the post-house, and we saw no more of him. I ought, perhaps, to have chastised him or forced him to fight; but his attitude surprised and silenced me, and I think I felt some admiration for a man who could accept defeat so excellently.

CHAPTER XXXII

When I restored Vera to her father, which I did, be sure, not without some pomp and posturing, he looked at me in astonishment.

'Why,' said he, 'is not this the youth I was to have knouted? You are the Cossack Chelminsky!'

'Certainly I am,' I admitted.

'One Cossack takes her and the other brings her back! One Cossack prevents her marrying with the Tsar, and the other entreats me for her hand, saying he will be Hetman and the brother and equal of kings. When I do not trust him, and will marry her to a great Russian Boyar, Mazeppa runs away with her and Chelminsky brings her back! What is Mazeppa's next move?'

'Oh, you have done with Mazeppa, Boyar, fear not: ask, if you will, what is Chelminsky's next move; that is different!'

'Well,' said the old man, 'what is it?'

'Chelminsky says,' I replied, 'that he too has

been promised the Hetmanate of the Cossacks, and that he would claim this Vera for his own!'

'A cool request, indeed!' exclaimed the Boyar, laughing; 'but I trust no more Cossacks! What, will you both be Hetman of the same province at the same time?'

'If Mazeppa had the word of a Tsar to back his chance, so had I: there are two Tsars in Russia.'

'Oh, oh!' laughed the Boyar, 'and each Tsar will nominate one Hetman, and the stronger of these shall cut the throat of the other. Is that how the matter shall be? Or shall the greater liar or deceiver prevail over the lesser, both being Cossacks?'

'Well, I will bring you the Tsar Peter's word,' I said angrily, 'and we shall see whether you dare speak thus of him whom the Tsar has promised to support.'

'Now this grows interesting,' said the Boyar. 'What! are the joint Tsars to unjoin in order that Chelminsky may oust Mazeppa, or Mazeppa Chelminsky, in the headship of a few Cossack thieves? Leave the Tsar alone, Chelminsky, and leave my girl alone also, and return among your Cossacks. The wench shall marry a Russian. She might have called herself Tsaritsa: maybe she still might, if she would! If she will

not marry the Tsar, she shall marry some Russian who lags not so very far behind him in power and in wealth, but neither a Mazeppa nor a Chelminsky.'

I left Kurbatof in wrath, vowing that he should sing a different tune when the Tsar Peter, that young lion, began to roar. Meanwhile I presented myself at Preobrajensky, where I found the 'Pleasure Regiment' grown larger than ever, and its drilling busily proceeding; and though the tall young Tsar himself played with the troops as though they were no more realities than so many companies or squadrons of tin soldiers, there were many officers, both young and old, who were much in earnest.

The Tsar was greatly diverted by my story of Vera, and of how Mazeppa had nearly carried her away to the Ukraine and I had brought her back.

'Is she so fair that she has made fools of two Cossacks?' he laughed.

'Ask his Highness Ivan Alexeyevitch whether she is fair,' I said: 'this is she who so nearly was Tsaritsa!'

'Hey, but our little Praskovia was not to be surpassed. What said we, Chelminsky, eh? Who would have thought my poor Vanushka would prove himself a man of such good taste, or

went he solely on the advice I sent him? My mother declared it would be all one to Ivan whether he married this maid or that; but I say he knows one from another, and some, I am told, would have given an eye to marry him!'

The Tsar Peter laughed much over this matter, namely, that Ivan should have shown preference for a maiden and that some should have desired to marry him. 'Well, then,' he ended, 'as to this Vera Kurbatof, what would you do?'

'I have out-foxed Mazeppa,' I said, 'and would have the fruits of my victory. Her father's head is turned by her almost success at the bride-choosing, and he will not hear of me.'

'How would it be to tell the fool you may one day be Hetman?' laughed Peter; but when I declared I had done so, and that Mazeppa had made the same boast, he looked grave.

'If that be so, and he prefers to believe that the Regent's word for Mazeppa will prevail over my word for Chelminsky, how shall he be persuaded except he wait to see the matter proved?'

'Write me a word on paper, Tsar,' I said; 'maybe it is my word he disbelieves, not yours.'

'To be shown by him to the Regent, and she to be put upon her guard? You speak like a fool, Chelminsky, and a dangerous fool! I wish your

tongue had not wagged of this. Will the fool blab to my sister that I have said this and that?

'Fear not, Tsar, for at present he thinks nothing of the matter, misbelieving all that I have said and all that Mazeppa has said. We are, he says, two Cossack liars, and there is an end of the matter.'

'And a good end too!' exclaimed Peter. 'Well, when I come to town for St. Ivan's Day, which is early next week, it may be I shall go with you to see this Kurbatof, and if we find that he is a discreet Boyar, and one likely to be of service to me (supposing that certain things presently happen which Boutourlin and some of the others think possible), I will show him that you are my man, and that he might do worse for this wench of his than let you have her.'

And thus, perforce, I was obliged to leave the matter for the present.

I went with Tsar Peter, or rather among those who accompanied his Highness, to the Cathedral within the Kremlin, in Moscow, for the solemn service of St. Ivan's Day, and waited near him at the great entrance until the Tsar Ivan with the Regent should arrive and be greeted by the crowds who awaited him, for this was his name's day.'

And presently there came driving up the

great state carriage of her Highness, and in it the Regent herself, the Tsar Ivan, Galitsin, who sat as high as the Tsar, or higher, and—smiling radiantly, most beautiful, the darling of the shouting crowd—Praskovia Soltikof, the Tsaritsa-elect.

Striking was the contrast this day between that lovely maiden and him whom she must presently own for husband and life-mate!

Ivan sat, timid, cowering from the people, angry to have been brought among them, and frightened, but half understanding what passed, hiding as well as he could from the crowd that stared and pointed and bowed and laughed and shouted around.

She, the very flower and queen among women, proud and radiant, loving the applause of the people and drinking it in like strong wine, smiling back upon them, winning all hearts: truly a beautiful picture!

Sophia the Regent smiled also, happy to have brought this bride-choosing to so good an issue and to see that the people applauded the choice of the Tsar. Galitsin sat proud and stiff, neither smiling nor frowning, but having an eye for every face in the crowds near the carriage, anxious to read the thoughts of the people and if possible to hear their opinions, as well as might be in the din and babel of sound about him.

And it was well indeed that there sat one in the carriage whose eyes were wide open this day, and his quick brain alert to perceive all that passed in the crowd, for otherwise it would have gone ill with the Tsar's beautiful young bride!

I, too, had been in danger without being aware of it until a few moments before the arrival of the Tsar and the Regent.

For as I stood watching the crowd at the great door of the Cathedral, together with the Tsar Peter and a number of his own people, I had suddenly perceived Olga Panief.

She stood below, at the bottom of the steps and among the crowd, shawled and half disguised, looking for me, I doubted not, the poor mad thing, and anxious to do me an injury if she could come close enough. She had not seen me, and I placed myself in such a way that she should not perceive my face, though she could not have reached me even though she had caught sight of me.

Nevertheless I kept a watchful eye upon her, for I would rather have no share in a brawl with a mad woman, in the face of all Moscow.

But I might have been quite at my ease, for—as soon appeared—Olga had another object this day for her murderous ire, and I was forgotten for the moment.

CHAPTER XXXIII

As the Regent's carriage drew near, all eyes being fixed upon it, and principally upon the beautiful young Tsaritsa-elect, I saw Olga push her way so as to be at the very door of it when it should draw up at the steps ; and as the wheels stopped she darted forward. Scarcely conscious of what I did, I called aloud, 'Soltikova, beware !'

I did not suppose that anyone had heard my cry, for a thousand other voices were raised at the time in greeting to the great persons ; but Galitsin stood up as Olga was about to strike, and seized the girl's wrist. In her hand was a Tartar dagger, which, but for Galitsin, would certainly have found its sheath in Praskovia Soltikof's breast.

Then there was commotion indeed ! The Tsar Ivan awoke suddenly from his lethargy and screamed.

'It is the mad one,' he cried ; 'take her away, cut her down, Streltsi, kill her—kill her !'

Praskovia Soltikof had grown pale, but she

kept her wits. 'Fear nothing, Ivan,' she said. 'This poor maiden would strike me, not thee; she is mad for jealousy. Do not kill her, Streltsi. Bethink thyself, Olga, only one can win; it is the will of God. I have done thee no injury except to gain the prize before thee.'

'Is not that enough, she-devil?' shrieked Olga, struggling in the hands of the Streltsi who had seized her. 'You have gained the prize not by merit but by wicked arts——'

'I have won because the Tsar has chosen me,' said Praskovia, and here the Regent interrupted.

'Listen, people,' she cried to those who stood near, 'and judge for yourselves how wisely the Tsar has decided who it is that shall sit with him in the highest place! This other is a rival whom the Tsar has rejected, and for envy she would murder the bride of the Tsar; yet her victim intercedes for her! Such mercy is Christ-like! What shall be done with this mad thing?'

'Kill her!' cried the Tsar, and some of the people shouted the same. 'Spare her and let her go, as the Soltikova has said,' cried others; and I found myself crying lustily with these. 'Spare her—she is one of God's unfortunates—madness is no crime!' and so forth.

'It shall be as the bride of the Tsar has said,' cried Sophia. 'Take her away, Streltsi, but do

not hurt her : we will find a place for her later. The new Tsaritsa has taught us all mercy, people ; cry " Oora " for the Tsar's bride—let her have a place in your hearts ! '

Now at first I was surprised at the clemency of the Regent, but when I thought over it I discerned that her motives were not the simple promptings of a Christian charity, but political. This marriage of Ivan's was the most important matter for her. If Ivan had refused to marry, her regency must end with Peter's awakening, which could not be delayed for ever. But once Ivan should have set a Tsaritsa at his side who should presently provide heirs to the elder male line, why, let Peter awake or sleep, it was all the same. Sophia would continue in her regency on behalf of Ivan and of the heirs of his body. Moreover, it was most desirable that the wife of Ivan should be well liked by the people ; for though between Ivan and Peter, if it came to choice, there could scarcely be room for doubt which would be the accepted of the nation, yet if Ivan's Tsaritsa were to become very popular the choice might go the other way for her sake and her children's. Therefore Sophia, for whose head-piece even the wisest of her day were ever ready to show respect, was quick to take advantage of Praskovia's kindness on this first occasion, by

letting the people see and understand what had passed in order that the new Tsaritsa might take good root in their hearts.

As for Praskovia Soltikof, she could afford to be generous and merciful. Moreover, it may be that she also had an eye this day to the people!

And for Olga Panief, she at least had cause to offer up thanks to her saint, for I think there could scarcely have been a score present who did not expect to see her cut in pieces by the swords of the Streltsi when it was discovered how great a crime she would have committed.

Tsar Peter was greatly diverted by this episode. Presently, when the two brothers were together in the portico of the Cathedral, I observed tall Peter smite weakly Ivan upon the shoulder so that the elder youth winced and screwed his face with the pain, though he smiled quickly back upon Peter, from whom he would gladly bear anything, so great was his love and admiration for him.

'Tell me, brother, how near came that Tartar to being the Tsaritsa?' the big one asked, laughing.

'She was one of three,' said Ivan, not so softly but that I overheard, though I knew not whether Praskovia Soltikof did so. 'She was one of three—Vera Kurbatof, whom I chose but who

would have none of me ; this mad devil, whom Sophia would have chosen for her good presence ; and Praskovia here, who chose herself. She brought also a recommendation from thee.'

Ivan would always converse with Peter, though rarely with others.

'Lord, brother, she would have made a fine Tsaritsa, this mad one,' laughed Peter. 'What a choice was thine, Sophia !'

'She looks a Tsaritsa,' said Sophia, frowning ; 'how should I know a devil lurked within her ? Few wear their dispositions on their sleeves that others may take a warning, though, Lord knows ! there are such even in our family !'

'Which means, in plain words, that there is a devil in me for all to see !' laughed Peter.

And the saying pleased him so well that he went among his friends telling what her Highness said and what he said, and so forth.

As for Olga Panief, she was sent to the Diévitchy monastery, and a pretty handful—I should say—the new Superior there must have found her ; indeed, as I happen to know, Olga soon earned for herself the misery of solitary confinement, as a punishment for wildness and foolishness such as the rest of the nuns could not tolerate.

But I was all afire to make sure of my beautiful Vera Kurbatof, and therefore I gave Tsar Peter no peace until he should have redeemed his promise to set this matter in order, if he could do so, to my advantage.

Now Peter was as yet but in his seventeenth year, though a giant in size, and Kurbatof—that wealthy Boyar—had hitherto scarcely given this Prince a thought ; for it was clear to all people that Ivan being the elder, and Sophia being full sister to Ivan and but half-sister to Peter, it was probable she would retain the Regency and Ivan the Tsarship. Peter was *nil* ; this joint Tsarship, indeed, had been a concession to the strength of the Naryshkin faction, but the day would come when its influence would die out and disappear in the strength of the Regent's faction.

Therefore Kurbatof was inclined to think little of Tsar Peter, and though he received him with respect, he was determined to let the youth see that he (Kurbatof) would be no man of his.

Now Vera's suitor, the fat old Boyar of ten thousand souls, or serfs — for the Russians measure their riches by the number of their serfs—was in the house when Tsar Peter came with me to speak to the Boyar, Vera's father.

'Who is this ?' asked Peter, before he had

time to salute Kurbatof. 'Is this the old Boyar who is thy rival, Chelminsky? Go, sir, for shame! You are too old and too fat to have so fair a bride as this Vera! Go, I say, and leave room for thy youngers and betters!'

The Boyar was proud, being rich and powerful, and the young Tsar's outspoken manner offended him.

'I am a suitor for her hand, Highness,' he said; 'if her father chooses to——'

Peter strode towards the Boyar; he seized him by the collar and shook him. 'Wouldst thou feed upon the fairest flower in the garden, fat slug?' he said. 'Go—crawl away and hide thyself—or I will crush thee with my heel! She is too good for thee, swine, in spite of all thy money bags!'

The Boyar panted with fear and surprise: he would have spoken, but he gazed upon the Tsar's face and dared not. Then he took his hat and cloak and went out quickly.

'Now, Boyar,' said Peter, 'show me this wench. I bring you a good suitor for her! This fellow Chelminsky may one day be Hetman of the Cossacks and call me brother; think of it!'

'Let him come back when he is Hetman,' growled old Kurbatof.

Whereat the Tsar laughed. 'Well, Chelminsky,' said he, 'let that answer suffice for thee. Maybe thou and the Hetmanate are not very far apart——' At this moment Vera herself entered the room, and the Tsar ended his speech with a long-drawn 'Oh!'

CHAPTER XXXIV

For the rest of the interview my patron, this Tsar of seventeen, made barefaced love to Vera Kurbatof, ignoring my presence and the motive of his visit, which had been to advance my suit with her father.

Vera—being the senior of the Tsar by nearly two years—received his boyish homage with complacence. Being anxious to secure his goodwill, she was amiable and animated, and the Tsar—as my jealous eyes could perceive—thought well of her beauty and manners.

When we came forth, after a visit of an hour, he made no further mention, either to Kurbatof or to Vera, of my suit: he had forgotten the object of his coming in the delight of Vera's presence.

'That is the best wench I have yet seen,' he said; 'and if——,' at this point Peter paused and became thoughtful.

'Your Highness wished to say,' I suggested, 'that if the *Boyarishnya* Vera—— '

'If she were not older than I, she might do for me when it is my turn to marry, next year.'

'Say, rather, if she were not promised to another,' said I, flushing. Peter frowned.

'Another? What other?' he asked.

'Your Highness came to arrange my suit,' I said, angrily enough; 'not to seek a bride for your own marrying.'

'Oh—oh! the Tsar must choose first! But, Lord, what a thundercloud is in thy face! Cheer up, man! is thy happiness bound up in this wench?'

'I did not look to have the Tsar for a rival,' I blurted. 'This is not fair dealing, Peter Alexeyevitch!'

'There is no rivalry yet. Fear not, she is too old for me. My mother will have me take a wife of sixteen; this one is nineteen, or near it, but she is handsome——'

'Fear not, man,' he suddenly continued, giving me a mighty slap upon the back: 'thou shalt be Hetman as soon as I am true Tsar, and then this old fool shall let thee take his girl.'

'Now the Tsar speaks,' I said, relieved and gratified. 'I knew not who spoke in thy voice before.'

'Oh, it was I, my friend,' he laughed. 'She

is too old for me, or I might yet take her out of thy hands.'

Nevertheless, Vera informed me to my surprise, when next I saw her, that Peter had been each day, and that he had commanded the Boyar, under pain of grievous punishment, to see that his daughter remained unbetrothed for a year.

'And what means that, Vera?' I asked gloomily. 'That he would preserve thee in safety for me to wed when I am Hetman, or that he will think of thee for himself when the time comes for his bride-choosing?'

'At any rate, it will keep our fat Boyar away,' she smiled. 'For the rest, save me from another Tsaritsa-choosing! Sooner let us——' Vera paused.

'Let us what, my Vera?' I insisted. 'Speak and fear not.'

'It is most sinful to marry without the consent of the parents,' she said; 'and yet I can imagine that such a step might be necessary. My father has been cruel in these matters, though I know well that he seeks my advantage as he sees it.'

The end of this conversation was that we were quite agreed to take matters into our own hands and do as we willed rather than as Tsars and fathers ruled it. But destiny proved too hard for us.

For the Boyar Kurbatof, seeing great hope for his daughter's advancement in the behaviour of the Tsar Peter, who insisted that Vera should remain unbetrothed for a year, now suddenly altered his attitude towards Vera ; and whereas she had hitherto enjoyed more freedom than was usual among Russian maidens at that time, he now instituted the strictest *terem* for her in his own house, placing her behind iron bars and silken curtains, and forbidding and effectually preventing all access to her except by her old nurse.

Thus it happened that the interview at which we had arranged to rebel proved to be our last meeting for many a day ; and to every application made by me to the Boyar for a sight of his beloved daughter, I received the reply : 'Come at the end of a year if you are Hetman.'

The Tsar Peter was admitted several times before his return to Preobrajensky, and this added much to my torture, which became so acute that I gladly received, presently, the call to ride with my Cossacks upon Galitsin's new expedition against the Crimean Tartars, leaving Vera to the care of the Highest and of her own discretion.

When I came to Batourin I saw Mazeppa for the first time since I had taken Vera from him at the post station, and I came prepared for war ; for surely, I thought, I should be called to account.

But Mazeppa was inclined to treat the matter lightly.

'What!' he said. 'You bring no wife? Where, then, is the fair, foolish Vera?'

'I have no wife. The Barishnya Kurbatof remains in Moscow. And why, I pray, is she called foolish?'

'Oh!' he laughed, 'it would not become me to say; but, tell me, has she proved herself so wise that she has sent Chelminsky about his business?'

'She is and remains wise,' I replied, 'since she both escaped Mazeppa and prefers to tarry where she is, safe from false friends and hypocrites.'

'Come, Chelminsky, take not such matters too seriously: women are toys. If she has played thee false, as she has served me and others also, it is a matter to laugh at, not to weep for. She is not worth a tear, my son, nor a frown—was there ever woman worth crying for?'

'I will uphold the honour of Vera with my sword; therefore speak well of her or not at all,' I said angrily; and Mazeppa laughed and shrugged his shoulders, though he looked annoyed. I have since thought all this indifference was assumed to deceive me, and that he had not yet forgotten his love for Vera, which

was real enough at the beginning, and when he would have stolen her from me.

After this we spoke of military matters, for Mazeppa was at this time the Hetman's chief minister for all that concerned warfare and the arming and preparing for campaigns, and it was necessary to put fifty thousand lances in the field very quickly to help Galitsin and his Russians against the Tartar Khan in the Crimea.

Now Samoilovitch, the Hetman, took command of our troops, wishing for military glory, and more especially to gain favour with Sophia, Regent of Russia, by personally assisting her dearly-loved Galitsin—from whom and from Sophia herself he had lately received little but coldness, for which, had he but known it, there was none but Mazeppa to thank. Mazeppa, preparing the ground for his own succession as Hetman, which is a life office, or is held until deposal, had traitorously done and said all he could to undermine the position of Samoilovitch, who suspected nothing, but trusted Mazeppa absolutely.

Therefore, when the Crimean expedition failed, and it was necessary to find a scapegoat in order that Galitsin, the favourite, should not suffer blame, the responsibility was shifted from his shoulders upon those of our poor

Cossacks, and especially upon Samoilovitch, the Hetman.

The result of which treachery was that Samoilovitch was arrested in his tent and sent to Moscow, and thence to Siberia—a deposed, exiled, and ruined man, without being permitted to visit his home before departure.

Now when rumours reached the army in the Crimea that Samoilovitch would be deposed, it occurred to me immediately that Mazeppa must, in some way, have a hand in this matter, and that the whole arrangement was, likely enough, his handiwork, since—unless I could somehow check-mate him—he would certainly be the one to profit by the Hetman's deposal.

Therefore I awaited the discharge of the troops in a frenzy of impatience, for I knew well that Mazeppa would not waste these precious days and weeks which destiny compelled me to fritter away in idle waiting.

CHAPTER XXXV

MAZEPPA had wasted no time. I gave him credit for the cunning of a fox, but no man could have expected that he would have done so much for himself in so short a while.

When I returned to Batourin I found that the matter of a succession to the Hetmanate was already settled, and the Hetman himself away in Moscow.

'And the Hetman is Mazeppa?' I asked, sick and faint with disappointment.

'Who but he?' said my informant; 'there was little talk of any other. It was two weeks ago. The order for deposal of Samoilovitch came from Moscow, and was read out in full assembly by Mazeppa himself, amid groans, for the orders stated that Samoilovitch had made Lord knows what dismal blunders with our poor lances, and had been fooled both this way and that by the Khan. Now Mazeppa had well packed the meeting both with Russians from Moscow and his

own people here, and when, presently, he asked whom the assembly would like to nominate as the new Hetman, subject to the approval of the Russian Tsars and Regent, someone called out "Mazeppa." Then another called his name, and then a hundred more. A few cried "Chelminsky" and "Panief" and other names, but the Mazeppas had the day by scores to one; and when the Russian delegate announced that this was well, since he had the authority of the Regent to nominate, in her name, this same Mazeppa, he was then and there elected, and set out presently for Moscow to do homage on his promotion.'

In any case, I comforted myself, I should not have succeeded at present, not until Peter should have asserted himself. My hopes must be fixed upon that time: when Peter ousted the Regent, I should do the same by Mazeppa.

Meanwhile, what devilry did he in Moscow? For it had come to this, that I feared to turn my back upon this fox when he chanced to be within reach of any fowl-yard of mine; and though he had ridiculed any further interest in Vera, I was anxious lest he should have lied to me.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to possess myself in patience, for Mazeppa's absence might prove my opportunity to work out my own destiny at Batourin, and I spent my time in diligently

making a party for myself, against the day of my advancement and his fall.

Mazeppa, I found, was not popular. There were hundreds who had grievances against him, and most of these promised that if it should come to another election Chelminsky's name should be shouted as loud as Mazeppa's, or louder.

By the time Mazeppa returned I flattered myself that I had done well for my cause. At any rate, I had out-foxed this cunning one who had stolen a march upon me in my absence. He came, suspecting nothing, and meanwhile I had prepared a powder mine beneath his feet, which should one day explode and bring him toppling from the seat upon which I would sit.

Mazeppa was friendly. I was to occupy no less exalted a position under him than I had enjoyed under Samoilovitch—I should find Mazeppa the Hetman, said he, no less my firm friend than Mazeppa the secretary.

'And a securer friendship that,' he laughed, 'be sure, than some of thine in Moscow!'

'What mean you by that?' I asked, flushing.

'Of all friends, beware of one especially,' he said. 'One who would have made thee Hetman; who would have saved a certain wench for thee, should other suitors claim her in thy absence; he who would—many folks said—pre-

sently show himself the young lion awake, and would lustily roar and go forth to kill for himself.'

'Go on,' I said hastily, 'and explain how and in what has this friendship failed me?'

'In three ways,' he laughed. 'Nay, look not so grim: blame me not, for how am I in fault? Did I believe in this young lion of thine? My faith was in the Regent and her Galitsin; said I not so from the first? And see how well my friends have served me! But this young Peter of thine——'

'Well,' I said, 'this Peter?'

'Where is thy nomination as Hetman? Where is any power that he has? He is still a cub, and looks not like roaring; he whines for others to bring him his food; he gambols near his parent-nest, and thinks not of going forth to kill.'

'His day will come,' I said, 'though it has not yet dawned. As for the Hetmanate, your friends have gained it for you, and it is yours. Do I deny or dispute it? Keep it, Mazeppa, in the Lord's name.'

'That I shall do with all my heart, and my good friends—such as thyself—shall help me so to do. I know whom I may trust, Chelminsky; we are old friends, thou and I.'

'So let us remain,' said I, for I would play the fox with this fox, and I did my utmost to seem very sincere in my friendship. 'The wise man, when he has lost the game, recognises that the luck is against him, and so do I! But what is this you hint as to the Tsar Peter having failed,' I added, as indifferently as I could, 'in his promise to protect a certain lady on my behalf?'

'I dare not tell you,' said Mazeppa, 'lest you fly out upon me and swear I lie to you for jealousy.'

'Bah!' I said, 'I am learning to follow your philosophy, that women are unworthy of a sigh.'

'Oh, if that be so, I wish you joy of your wisdom!' he said, laughing, 'and I will tell you all. The Tsar Peter—well, he is young enough to think differently of such things. He will marry before many months, and meanwhile——'

'Yes, meanwhile he teaches himself the art of love-making in advance,' I said, finishing his sentence when he paused. 'What a tattered thing will be the heart of Vera as I shall receive it!'

'Be not so sure even of a tattered remnant!' he laughed; 'young Peter is a more dangerous rival than his brother Ivan!'.

'Does all this mean,' said I, 'that Mazeppa has renewed his suit of late, and with no more success than of old?'

'What, I?' he exclaimed, flushing nevertheless, in spite of his bravado. 'No, Chelminsky; I have had sterner work to do in Moscow than love-making, though indeed there was good reason to believe that if I had raised a finger a certain bird would have sung!'

'What, both for Mazeppa and for Peter?' cried I, affecting to be vastly amused. 'By the saints, a pretty warbler is this that I have fed in my bosom, that sings to all comers! Which was the favoured, Mazeppa, thou or Tsar Peter?'

'I will tell thee truth,' said Mazeppa: 'the Tsar Peter being seriously in love, and I, as thou knowest, no more than toying with passion, he desired to have the way clear for himself; therefore I acted the dutiful vassal and left his Highness a straight course.'

'So that I, for my part, have lost both patron and mistress?' said I, still affecting indifference, though actually I was near boiling over with rage; 'for it seems you would have me understand that whether Peter wooed or Mazeppa, at any rate there was no remembrance of me.'

'Chelminsky, the new-found philosopher, will not weep, I wager, even though so it be!' he said;

'nor yet will he blame the fair Vera, who takes her wooing where she finds it.'

'Then, I say,' cried I, firing up at last, 'that Mazeppa is a liar, Hetman or no Hetman—as great a liar as Hetman as he has been from the beginning and will be to the end. Shall I beat thee with a stick now, Hetman Mazeppa, or spit thee with a sword presently before witnesses? Thou owest me a drubbing for the wedding I gave thee with Olga, and another for spoiling thy villainy with Vera. Come, I am ready for it now, and at the same time thou shalt answer to me for many lies, and for a certain knouting which I did not get—no thanks to thee!'

'Oh, if thou must have it so, meet me in the Krasinsky Wood at noon to-morrow,' he said, keeping cool while I raved. 'Go cautiously and with thy second only, for, understand, as Hetman I must not be seen duelling with my inferior. I meet thee as a favour, Chelminsky.'

'Well, do not play the coward and stay away,' I raved, 'for Hetman or no Hetman, and favour or no favour, I will make thee eat thy lies, fox Mazeppa, and that I swear!'

'If you will fight, fight you shall,' he replied, 'and let the best man win!'

I ought to have felt some suspicion at this saying, for Mazeppa well knew that he was not

my match with the sword or rapier, but all that buzzed in my head at this time—poor fool that I was—was the desire to force his lies down his throat, and to make him suffer for his easy triumph in the matter of the Hetmanate. Why, thought I, if I should kill him to-morrow there must be another Hetman, and that shall surely be I ! But the greatest offence of all was the manner of his talk about Vera.

And full of this thought I went among my friends that night, bidding them be prepared for a sudden new election, and one of them, young Stanislaus Bedinsky, I chose to be my second.

CHAPTER XXXVI

All who have read thus far in my records must be already impressed by the fact that I have told the varying tale of my destiny wheresoever it crosses that of Mazeppa with strictest impartiality. One day I succeed in having the better of him, another I am worsted by him ; and on the whole he out-foxes me, save, perhaps, in one important matter.

On this day of our appointed duel I must admit my utter defeat and discomfiture. I was fooled, and worsted, and out-foxed, as, doubtless, I deserved to be, for if I had acted in cold instead of hot blood I should never have persuaded myself that Mazeppa would fight me.

When we came to the rendezvous in the place appointed, Bedinsky and I, thinking—poor fools—to find our Mazeppa with one other, we found Mazeppa, indeed, but attired as Hetman and attended by an escort of fifty lances.

'What is this fooling, Mazeppa?' said I. 'Send these fellows away, all but one, and let us come to an issue.'

'We shall come to an issue, Chelminsky, as soon—I doubt not—as will be pleasing to you. Seize and disarm the rebels, officer.'

Then Bedinsky and I were suddenly pounced upon by a dozen men each and overpowered. Our weapons were taken from us and we were bound to two trees.

Then began a trial. An indictment was read: I, Chelminsky, had conspired against the authority of the elected Hetman. I had formed a party of revolution which should take the first opportunity to upset the Government and elect a new Hetman, that Hetman to be Chelminsky.

Three witnesses were produced from Heaven knows where among the trees, and these rascals, men whom I had believed to be on my side, described how both I and Bedinsky and others—still to be arrested—had gone among the people canvassing for supporters, promising reward and favour to all those who would assist in ousting the Hetman last elected and in raising another in his place.

'Save yourself the trouble, Mazeppa,' I cried, bitterly scornful, 'all these things are admitted. I am the culprit: Bedinsky and the others named are but private friends of mine and not responsible for the "revolution"—if so you must call it—which is the child of my own brain.'

'A fool-child, like its father,' said Mazeppa. 'Did I not say from the first you were a fool, Chelminsky? Too great a fool to be Hetman, even as I told Peter the Tsar! He believed me, my friend, and would not have nominated thee in any case.'

'That is a lie, Mazeppa,' said I. 'Maybe I shall yet prove it!'

'That must be as the court wills,' he replied. 'The offence is admitted, gentlemen of the court: the culprit Chelminsky has confessed his crime. Proceed to judgment and sentence.'

The witnesses were put back and the judges—three colonels of Cossack regiments, my equals in rank—deliberated. Their deliberations did not last long—but five minutes at the most—and they presently announced themselves agreed.

'The prisoners are guilty,' said the senior colonel, and it will scarcely be believed, but both we and others who were named, but not present, were then and there sentenced to death by beheading.

'My God, Mazeppa!' I cried. 'Do I dream? Am I to be done to death by thee because from first to last we have been rivals in love and politics? Dost thou fear I shall win in the end? Keep thy Hetmanship and let me go!'

Mazeppa held up his hand.

'Let the sentence be executed,' he said.

'Thou devil, Mazeppa!' I cried. 'I would to heaven I had allowed the wolves to gnaw thy naked carcass that day in Volhynia thou knowest of!'

Mazeppa flushed red and then grew pale.

'The Hetman was set riding naked through his own country, brothers,' said I, 'for disgraceful conduct: he was bound to his horse and would have starved but for me. It was then he bestowed the immeasurable favour of his presence upon the Cossack nation, who have now made him their Hetman. I am Chelminsky, whose father, under Hmelinsky, fought and beat the Poles. I wish I had left this tyrant to the wolves: it is I that should be Hetman—not Mazeppa!'

I must have been beside myself to speak these foolish words: to my shame I record them.

'Let the sentence go forward,' said Mazeppa, white with rage; 'Bedinsky first.'

And then before my eyes they bound poor Bedinsky upon his knees to a tree stump and beheaded him with a sword.

I commended my soul to Christ, praying even more heartily that Mazeppa's misdeeds might be remembered against him for this crowning sin.

And now came my turn. They came to remove me from the tree to which I was bound

in order that I might be re-bound to a stump more convenient for beheading; but Mazeppa bade them pause.

'Chelminsky, thou has proved once again how great a fool thou art,' he said. 'Know that I had made up my mind to forgive in remembrance of our old friendship and of a certain service thou didst me, and which I have not forgotten. But since thou hast lied before all these people, inventing some ridiculous adventure of which I have now heard for the first time, maliciously desiring to injure me in the eyes of my faithful people, I have thought better of my mercy. Thou must die for thy foolishness.'

'Mercy and Mazeppa!' I exclaimed bitterly. 'Mercy is a bastard child if of thy begetting, Mazeppa; no wonder it is strangled at the very birth!'

'Stay,' he said; 'thy invention has given me an idea. I will have thee stripped and set riding; it is a pretty invention. Strip him, men.'

'Or, stay,' said Mazeppa, as the fellows began to unbind me in order to divest me of my clothes. 'My fool of a heart is soft for thee, Chelminsky; thou shalt be given a chance. There is thy own horse; mount him and ride like the devil. Thou shalt be pursued after an hour: thou shalt have neither weapon nor

money ; there shall be a reward for thy shooting ; do you hear, men ? Fifty gold pieces for Chelminsky's head so long as it is taken from his shoulders in Cossack territory.'

'Good ! I accept,' I cried, 'and I thank thee, Mazeppa. I will remember this to thy credit !'

'Well, mount and ride like the devil. Take his sword and his purse. Now go.'

My heart bounded for joy. I could scarce believe that this good fortune had befallen me—me who stood a moment before in the very shadow of death ! My horse was ready saddled : it was Shadrach, a splendid stallion of Ukraine blood, somewhat heavily formed, but of spirit unmatched.

As I leaped away I half expected to hear a volley behind me and to be toppled from my saddle in obedience to a signal from Mazeppa ; but I did him an injustice, for he intended me to have this chance of life.

I would ride straight for Moscow : Mazeppa and his men would know this and would follow upon my heels without the trouble of finding my tracks ; but what cared I ? My pursuers must have good horseflesh between their knees if they would catch Shadrach.

I must ride fifty leagues before I should be safe : by then I should be in Russian territory and beyond the reach of my pursuers.

Away we careered, we with our start of an hour, and at first Shadrach went well; but before we had gone many leagues I realised that he was not at his best. He sweated and foamed; his breath laboured, and the exertion, which would have been a trifle to him on another day, distressed him.

I dismounted and examined the beast. I was prepared for the discovery which I now made: he had been tampered with. Some devil, inspired by a worse devil, of course, must have doctored him in his stable this morning.

'Mazeppa,' I said to myself, 'this mercy of thine is a deep-laid scheme. This chance of life, for which I thanked thee, is no chance!'

I sat down by the roadside and thought for my life. Shadrach stood by with heaving flanks and head held low; his eyes dull, his mouth distressed with foam. 'You shall carry me to yonder wood,' I said, 'and then farewell, old friend, for a while!'

The road, half a league further on, became a rutty forest track, dark overhead, and running through dense rows of large trees.

I tied Shadrach to a stump, well off the road, first emptying my saddle-bags. There was a coil of thin rope among other things. I never went without this, in case I should require it, in

emergency, for halter, spare bridle, or for a thousand possible purposes. It should do me a good turn this day !

I now took the rope and fastened it across the track at a few inches above the ground, passing it from tree to tree so that the first horse coming this way must inevitably trip and fall.

Then I hid myself behind a bush close at hand, and waited.

CHAPTER XXXVII

My advantage of an hour, if it had been honestly accorded me, must have been greatly shortened by poor Shadrach's malady, for before I had waited half an hour I heard the sound of hoofs, and presently there came in sight Kostigin, one of our Cossacks, mounted upon his splendid horse, which I well knew as one of the few rivals of my Shadrach for speed and endurance. I was sorry to see so fine an animal rushing down to possible injury. If either must be seriously hurt, I would rather it were Kostigin ; but there was no help for it, and the beast must run the risk to earn my safety.

Nearer came Kostigin, urging his horse. He rode as though he were riding a great race, sitting firm and square and his eyes fixed upon a distant point as though he hoped to catch sight each moment of my fleeting figure.

Nearer they came, the good horse Ajax breathing audibly, but going strongly. Then of a sudden he reached and tripped over my string-

trap, and in an instant Kostigin was flying among the trees and poor Ajax rolling over and over among pine needles.

As for me I was up and upon Kostigin long before he had realised that a calamity had overtaken him. I possessed myself of his sword and stood with it at his throat, and in another moment his career would have ended, for I could not afford to let him go.

'Do not kill me, Chelminsky,' he cried, 'I should not have shot you: there is something, besides, that I can tell you which will be of use to you!'

'That is an easy lie to invent,' I replied grimly. 'You would have shot me, Kostigin, from behind.'

'I swear I would not,' he said; 'the orders are not to shoot but to chase you. You have been a dupe from the beginning. Mazeppa had planned all this—do you think he did not know of your rebellion? There have been many to keep him informed. The provocation leading to your challenge yesterday and the comedy of this morning—all was prepared beforehand.'

'However that may be, my friend, I must take Ajax, by your kind permission, and indeed I know not how I am to spare your life——'

'There is another thing: let this buy my life

for me. You are to be chased as far as the frontier. Then you are to be taken. Arrangements are already made : you will be surrounded and captured, kept for a year, and then escorted to your own home in Volhynia.'

'Why all this ?' I laughed. 'Why chased and captured and kept ? Why not allowed to go to Moscow ?'

'As to that, only Mazeppa knows Mazeppa's mind, but so it is. He is jealous maybe, and would rather not have you bargaining with the Tsar Peter against him. More than this I know not any more than yourself.'

The horse Ajax, meanwhile, had recovered his feet and stood shaking himself at intervals, panting, but apparently unhurt. I felt him up and down ; there was nothing broken.

'Well, take your life, Kostigin,' I said. 'Ride back and meet the next man ; tell him he were wiser to return with you. You will find Shadrach yonder. Mazeppa shall yet hear of me again—tell him so, if you are bold enough. I do not intend to be caught at the frontier. Give me your gun and any money you have—so ! Will Mazeppa murder those other fellows, like poor Bedinsky ?'

'I do not think so. One had to die for example, he said ; but, saving your dignity, he

does not regard this rebellion as very serious or dangerous, once you are out of the way.'

'Well, one day I may return. We shall for ever be rivals, Mazeppa and I; to-day he wins—to-morrow it may be my turn. I think I hear galloping hoofs. I am glad to have spared you, Kostigin, but I shall kill the next that interferes with me. Ride back and tell him so; I do not mean to be spied upon!'

I mounted Ajax, who was now well breathed. He moved a little stiffly at first, but he was unhurt, and carried me well. A mile away I waited, anxious to know whether I was still pursued; but I could hear no sound of galloping hoofs, and presently I rode easily forward, convinced that Kostigin had argued well, and that the pursuit was over.

Then I altered my course, and made through forest and waste until I passed in safety into Russian territory.

But when I was nearing Moscow, riding easily through the forest near Preobrajensky, I met with a very notable adventure, which I must here relate.

It was very early in the morning of a beautiful summer's day, and as I approached within a league of the Tsar Peter's house, the same at which I had often visited him a year ago or more

(when he had caused Mazeppa to compete with me, and had promised that I should one day be Hetman in virtue of the excellence of my horsemanship), I suddenly heard the commotion of galloping hoofs, and looking out I spied furiously riding towards me at frantic speed a half-naked youth, who seemed mad with alarm, and rode blindly forward, scarcely seeing where he went or what he did.

And to my boundless surprise I recognised this frantic rider for the Tsar Peter himself—for him who is at this day known as Piotr Veleeki, Peter the Great; whose slightest word or frown is feared or hailed by millions of subjects; the conqueror of Charles of Sweden; a second Alexander the Great; the maker of a new Russia; the greatest Russian that God's sun ever shone upon. Dear saints! when I think of all this and then of that picture of the frightened rider, I console myself with the thought that there are ups and downs for all men, and not only for me!

Yes, it was the Tsar Peter himself, dressed in his night-shirt and nothing more, frantic with terror, galloping he knew not whither.

'Out of the way, there, or you are a dead man!' he shrieked. 'I will run you through: I swear it—clear out of the way!'

I did as the Tsar bade me, but I cried out, 'Highness, I am a friend—Chelminsky the Cossack. Is there danger? I am on your side!'

He pulled up. 'Yes, it is Chelminsky,' he said, staring at me with wild eyes; 'but how know I that you are not for my accursed sister?'

'I was always for thee, Tsar; my name is in the book at Preobrajensky. I am a soldier of the Pleasure Army!'

'True—I remember. Ride with me and I will tell you all. Are you only arriving from Batourin? Then you know nothing. My sister, whom may the devil claim for his own, has plotted against me. Last night the Kremlin was full of villains assembled and paid by her to murder me. Two good fellows deserted and warned me: by now the rest are skulking around the house at Preobrajensky, unless my fellows have caught them. I should have been murdered but for the warning, thanks and praise be to God the Saviour!' The Tsar crossed himself devoutly. It was a remarkable sight—this panic-stricken young giant frightened into prayer, sitting bare-legged upon his horse, in mid-forest.

I argued with him. I would go forward while he concealed himself. I would fetch clothes for him—that was the first need, and bring back

word of what happened at the house, which, though fortified and garrisoned very strongly, was not, said the Tsar, prepared for sudden assault.

At first the Tsar would not tarry until I returned ; but presently, finding a portion of the forest which was so dense that he might safely hide therein without fear of discovery, he consented to wait. Then I rode quickly forward and reached Preobrajensky.

The garrison was in a tumult of preparation in case of attack : every hand was busy, every face haggard and anxious ; but the most anxious of all was that of the Tsar's mother, that good and gentle Tsaritsa Nathalia, who was in distress because of her son's disappearance.

'He will go to the monastery at Troitsa,' she said, 'and there I shall join him ; but who shall protect him upon the way ?' Then I told the Tsaritsa how I had seen the Tsar and had returned for clothes and for news ; but she informed me that the Tsar's clothes had already followed him, though probably the messenger had been so frightened that he had turned aside from the road rather than meet me. 'Go quickly, good Chelminsky !' she said, 'and ride with him. Take others with you—I am in dread for my poor boy !'

But when I sought the Tsar in the place where I had left him he was not to be found, so great a coward had sudden terror made of this young lion—he who should presently learn to roar so loudly that all the world would be terrified at his voice!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

I RODE straight to the monastery at Troitsa, hoping to find opportunity for serving the Tsar Peter with distinction. This, it seemed to me, might prove the hour of his destiny, unless indeed terror should have rendered him unfit to assert himself. But I found matters went strongly for Peter and against Sophia, for there flowed into Troitsa a constant stream of soldiers, some from Preobrajensky, others Streltsi deserters, some serf soldiers sent in hurriedly by the Boyars who were on Peter's side, and even the newly-enrolled men of Gordon's and Lefort's regiments, upon whom the Regent had depended the most. There would be no fighting, and no opportunity for distinction, for the weight all tilted naturally to one side.

As for Tsar Peter, after hiding himself for a day or two in the forests, the prey of helpless terror, he found heart of grace and came to Troitsa, from which safe retreat he dictated terms to his sister the Regent, which terms were no

terms, indeed, since she herself was now compelled to take the veil, while he possessed himself of the throne, whence from this time he reigned as undisputed Tsar, though Ivan, for a while, made a show of sitting conjointly with his brother upon the highest seat.

Now that Peter reigned I had great hopes to turn the tables upon Mazeppa. This time surely the luck was mine! for here was I in Moscow, driven hither, moreover, by Mazeppa himself, just in the nick of time! Destiny had dealt the good cards into my hands for once, and the old fox, Mazeppa, should be smoked out of his hole!

Meanwhile I went, not without anxiety, to see my Vera. Mazeppa's words, even though I did not believe them, had been somewhat disquieting. Had the Tsar stolen her from me? Not her heart, indeed—I felt sure that that was my own—but her hand. If he should have announced his intention to choose her for his bride, what could she have done, with none to help her escape the undesired splendour of this betrothal?

I found the house of Boyar Kurbatof, like many another mansion in Moscow during these days, in trouble and disorder—the Boyar himself under arrest, Vera almost beside herself with

helpless misery, knowing not what she should do or where she should go.

If I had had any doubt of her good faith towards me, her reception of me when I arrived unexpectedly would have dissipated such doubt. She flew to meet me with a scream of delight and lay for a moment locked in my arms, weeping tears of joy and relief.

'Are you mine, Vera, are you mine?' I murmured. 'Tell me quickly!'

'Oh, whose should I be?' she whispered back. 'Have I ever been other than yours, dear Chelminsky?'

'Not the Tsar's?' I said. 'It was told me that he would have none but you, and I feared—I know not what; for this Peter is not like that Ivan!'

'I stood well with his Highness,' Vera laughed, 'for three months after you had gone. Then he wearied of me, and Olga Kostromsky was favourite. Then Avdotia Lapouchine appeared, and he is betrothed to her: have you not heard?'

The news relieved me greatly, though I did not tell Vera how much, lest she should think me lacking in the virtue of trustfulness.

'And what of Mazeppa?' I asked.

Then Vera told me that though Mazeppa, upon receiving his nomination as Hetman, had

presumed to visit once again the home he had outraged, in order to resume his suit for Vera's hand, the old Boyar her father had caused his servants to expel him from the house without deigning to speak to him or give him any answer to his insolent advances.

Mazeppa's words to me had conveyed a very different meaning.

As for the Boyar's arrest, her father had been so indignant, said Vera, over the conduct of Tsar Peter, who had seemed to choose Vera for his bride and had afterwards passed her over for another, that he had violently sided with the Regent so soon as differences arose, lending her money and serf-levies from his estates, which conduct brought about his arrest by Peter's orders, as soon as the young Tsar heard of it.

Having thus made sure of my Vera, I hastened again to Troitsa in order to push my interest with Tsar Peter ; but his Highness was so busy that I could not obtain his ear.

'Wait,' he said, 'good Chelminsky ; let us first see what I am ; my sister's sins still hang about my neck ! '

Therefore I waited a week, and a second week, the Tsar being now in Moscow, and at the end of that time I obtained from Peter the saying that there might soon be reason for making a change

in the office of Hetman, and that I should have the next nomination !

This was something, though not much.

Then suddenly, as I walked one day within the Kremlin walls, I met Mazeppa.

He greeted me friendly, as though there had never been a difference between us, thanking heaven that he had been able at our last meeting to allow me to escape from Batourin :

'My captains were all dead against mercy,' said he. 'I had no easy matter, believe me, to bring them to an agreement concerning thee. Why didst thou rebel against me, Chelminsky ? Canst thou not be happy unless thy head stands higher than my own ?'

'I shall conspire and rebel again, never fear !' I laughed. 'You have not yet quite done with me, Mazeppa ! As for thy mercy, I think it was a lie : thou wouldst have had me shot or captured. Rather it was thy captains that stayed thy hand !'

'Believe as you will,' he replied angrily ; 'what is it to me ? Only remember, the Ukraine is not safe for thee in future. Because of thy own foolishness there is no longer room in our country for Mazeppa and for Chelminsky also.'

'Is Mazeppa among the prophets ?' I laughed. 'Neither to me is it given to know the future, my

friend, nor to thee. I may yet stand very high among the Cossacks ! '

' Think'st thou so ? Hast thou spoken to his Highness as to this foolish ambition of thine ? No ? Then understand that I have been before thee in this matter, and that thou shalt henceforth whine and beg to him in vain, for nothing will come of thy entreaties ! '

And indeed, when I at last obtained the Tsar's ear, I found that Mazeppa had been before me, and that in his own mysterious fashion he had not only pleased the Tsar by his manner and bearing (he whom the Tsar had disliked up to now !), but also inspired confidence by his political arguments.

So that when I spoke to the Tsar on the subject of the Hetmanate, he put me somewhat brusquely aside, saying that the present Hetman's attitude was correct and pleasing, and that it would be unnecessary to make any change.

' But what of thy promises, Tsar ?' I said bitterly. ' Instead of fulfilling them to my advantage, thou has exalted my enemy over my head ! '

' Not I, Chelminsky ; thou art suffering, my man, for the deeds of my sister and Galitsin, which should be a glory to thee, seeing that I have suffered and am suffering the same. This Mazeppa has shown me, moreover, that he will

make as good a Hetman as thou. His speech is the very incarnate genius of the Cossack race; learn from him awhile, my friend, and in time thou shalt take his place!'

I was bitterly disappointed by the Tsar's conduct, and I doubt not my looks showed it, for he laughed and clapped me upon the shoulder. 'Look not so mournful, man!' he said. 'On the whole I have done well by thee, for have I not left thee that wench of thine, Vera?' The Tsar burst into a roar of laughter, in the midst of which I bowed myself out of his presence, hurt and indignant.

When I told Vera of my disappointment and of the Tsar's boast that he had left her to me as an act of friendliness, she flushed and told me that he had left her, indeed, to me, but out of no friendliness. 'Ask him what befell when he grew more familiar than was pleasing to me?' she said. And though I did not ask his Highness, I know now that Vera actually boxed the Tsar's ears on one occasion, thereby immensely raising his respect for her as well as his admiration, though not his affection, which had already begun to wane in favour of others. The Tsar Peter's heart was ever of the butterfly nature, flitting from flower to flower and remaining longest there where most honey is obtainable.

To which respect and admiration of the Tsar Vera added much when presently she went with me to claim forgiveness for her father.

The Tsar grew angry when Vera proffered her request, but when he made a show of refusing it Vera grew angry also.

'A worthy Tsar, thou!' she exclaimed, 'that beginnest thy reign by taking vengeance upon old men, and by breaking promises to those who have well served thee!'

'What mean you by that, minx?' exclaimed Peter angrily. 'May I not punish those who have offended me? And as for promises, what promise have I made that I will not one day redeem?'

'My father was loyal to the Regent while her Highness claimed the obedience of the Boyars. Is there offence in that? If *thou* hadst been reigning Tsar instead of a Tsar in leading-strings, and he had lent thee treasure and men, would that have been a crime? Up to the moment of thy proclamation the Boyars were her Highness's men, not thine. To-day my father would serve thee, even as he served the Regent.'

'Well, we shall see; it may be that I shall test his loyalty through his purse,' said Peter, laughing. As to the broken promise—is this fellow Chelminsky thy husband, that thou shouldst speak thus boldly for him?'

'As forever he has been husband of my heart, let woo who would!' said Vera.

The Tsar flushed and looked for a moment as though he would reply passionately; but though his face worked and his head jerked round in the manner I have since learned to know as the forerunner of that cruel mood into which he too frequently relapses now in middle age, he recovered himself and laughed aloud.

'By the Majesty of Saint Cyril, wench,' he said, 'thou art a bold one: darest thou marry such a minx, Chelminsky?'

'I must marry her or die, Tsar,' I said, 'wherefore I dare less to marry.'

Vera laughed and pressed my arm. 'Make him Hetman, Tsar,' she said: 'he will serve thee better than the fox thou hast set up.'

But in this matter the young Tsar was immovable.

'Good Lord, girl,' he said, 'must all things go as thou wouldst have them? He shall be Hetman of all the Cossacks now in Moscow—does that satisfy thee?—with reversion at Batourin when Mazeppa shall have proved himself the fox you think him!'

And with this appointment, which was indeed an excellent one, I was obliged to remain content, hoping ever that Mazeppa must one day show

himself for what I knew him to be. Yet though the Tsar received from far and near almost daily complaints of Mazeppa's deceitfulness—how he misruled his Cossacks, coquetted with Pole, Swede and Tartar, and was faithless to every friend he possessed—yet Peter, in this one instance, mistook his man from first to last; believing his word, trusting him in face of overwhelming evidence, and standing his friend and ally through every attempt, whether political or private, to shake his faith in the Hetman. The Tsar was usually a better judge of character than he showed himself in Mazeppa's case!

A fox among foxes, and certainly the most plausible liar the world has ever seen, was this fox Mazeppa, with whose cunning my poor feeble wits had lately essayed to cope. And will it be believed that the great and wise Tsar himself was perhaps the only human being who was blind to the real character of the man? Was he indeed blind? Rather men will say that if Mazeppa was a fox, Peter was no less; and that he saw his advantage in being served by such a Hetman!

Nevertheless there came a day, after many years, when at length the scales fell from Peter's eyes. For Mazeppa himself—at the first great opportunity in his life when he must choose

definitely a side—proved that he was but a dabbler in politics, and that he no more understood the greatness of his master than the rest of the world had then realised it.

That day was one of those stirring ones which preceded the battle of Pultowa.

CHAPTER XXXIX

By this time Vera and I were both middle-aged, and as happy a married pair as were to be found in all Russia. The old Boyar Kurbatof was dead long since, and Vera was a rich woman, possessor of three thousand souls, or serfs, and the mother of five children. My place in the realm and in the esteem of the Tsar was high, for I commanded almost more Cossacks in Moscow than Mazeppa could assemble under arms at Batourin.

As for the Tsar Peter, none assuredly would have recognised him at this time for the stripling of Preobrajensky—he who had once been wont to take life no more seriously than as a long holiday, to be spent in playing with pleasure armies and toy fleets, in the drinking of much beer and honey-mead, and in rioting with stable youths, and perhaps also with the other sex of that class.

For see him now the great Autocrat, the genius of a powerful nation, whose incarnate

spirit he is ; the rival of Charles of Sweden, with whom he will throw at Pultowa for an empire. Great he is to-day, and yet how small ! for the taste for debauchery and drunkenness, begun in boyhood, has survived ; and when the Tsar is not busy fashioning his empire within and without, upsetting the old Russia and building up the new, showing his greatness here, there, and everywhere, he is buffooning, drinking, revealing all that is small and grotesque in his marvellous character, without shame and without reserve, as though he neither knew nor cared to know what is deemed seemly and expedient in civilised societies.

Yet, though Peter rarely showed the slightest respect for women, his attitude towards Vera was ever most dignified and respectful. He had soon wearied of Avdotia Lapouchine, the Tsaritsa, and had condemned her to take the veil ; but though from that time onwards his relations with women had altogether lacked chivalry, an exception was always made in Vera's favour. As for Mazeppa, I saw him but rarely. And so the years rolled on, until the great day of Pultowa.

Charles of Sweden had marched within a few days' journey of Moscow, which he might have sacked had he thrown himself immediately against the city ; but when about to do so he received a

letter from Mazeppa which caused him to sweep round through Batourin in the Ukraine, Mazeppa's capital, in order to pick up a contingent of fifty thousand lances offered by the Hetman for use against his most faithful and indulgent master, the Tsar.

For Mazeppa had made the fatal mistake of believing that the sun of the Swede was in the ascendant, whereas the light now reddening in the sky was the dawn of Russia's great day : the day of her New Beginning.

Now Peter, ignorant of Mazeppa's treachery, had meanwhile sent orders that the Hetman and his fifty thousand men should hold themselves in readiness to join the Russian army at a moment's notice. Mazeppa replied by letter that he was ill of the gout and unable to move. A second missive on the following day, written by a secretary, explained that the Hetman was dying, and had already received the last offices of the Church. When he had despatched this last letter, Mazeppa left Batourin with as many of his lances as he could persuade that treachery such as his would prove the best policy—about two thousand men. Two thousand dupes out of the promised fifty thousand !

'Here is thy chance, Chelminsky,' said Peter the Tsar. 'Thou hast waited long. Mazeppa is

dead or dying ; his lances want a leader : Menshikof shall ride with thy Cossacks, and thou shalt be Hetman of the Ukraine.'

But I was devoted by this time to my own Cossacks, and preferred to remain by the Tsar's side.

'Let me wait and see these Ukraine Cossacks—what Mazeppa has made of them,' said I. 'Better my own, who are used to me, than his, Tsar, when it comes to fighting ! In any case, I will have only thee for master, whether there or here ! '

But when Peter with his army reached Batourin, he found that the old fox had left his hole.

The rage of the Tsar when he learned that Mazeppa had proved a traitor was dreadful to witness. He fell writhing in a fit, his head and limbs jerking, his face contorted. When he recovered, he bade Menshikof and his troops throw themselves upon city and castle, burning the place with all it contained ; then, having caused an effigy of Mazeppa to be fashioned, he first hanged it in public and afterwards had it dragged through the filth of the streets. Every year since that day Mazeppa's name is cursed throughout Russia upon the Day of Curses, which is the first Sunday of the long Fast.

But the delay caused by Mazeppa's adhesion cost the Swedish forces dear, for it compelled them to winter in Russia, and by means of sundry small successes the armies of Peter began to render their position dangerous.

Then Mazeppa actually wrote to the Tsar proposing to deliver both Charles and his armies into his hands; but Peter would have none of him and his promises, fearing more treachery. Instead, the Tsar replied to Mazeppa with shameful words, saying that he would presently have both Charles and Mazeppa also.

And in the summer came the great day, when Charles and his dwindled and hungry army, and with him Mazeppa and his Cossacks—poor deluded men—attacked the Tsar at Pultowa.

All the world knows of that great battle; how the star of Charles fell for ever and that of Peter rose, never to set. How Charles fled with a few men and with Mazeppa, who preserved his own skin intact and tried to spirit away with him, moreover, two barrels of gold pieces which he had taken care to secure.

Yet it must not be said that Mazeppa fought ill on that day. Never did men fight more desperately than our good Cossack fools who had followed the old fox into ruin. Once the Tsar, riding near me at the moment, bade me watch

the old Hetman charge with his fellows. By the saints, the sight did one good, even though they were against us!

'Curse him!' cried Peter, 'his lances kill three to every one of them that falls. Take a thousand of our Cossacks, Chelminsky, and chase the rascals into the Vorskla! Bring me Mazeppa alive, and by all the devils I will make thee head over every Cossack that breathes!'

That was a notable fight. At the first charge, the numbers being in our favour, not a man fell on either side, for neither were our fellows willing to slay their brethren, nor they us; but ours, as they rode through the others' ranks, hurled reproaches and shameful names at them and at Mazeppa for their treachery, so that when we turned to charge back again Mazeppa's men were furious and fought like devils, and many scores of saddles were emptied on both sides.

As for me, I had a pass or two with Mazeppa in the crowd, but neither of us struck his best.

'Ride out of the crush, Mazeppa, and I will follow,' I said. 'I must seem to pursue thee, but for God's sake let me not bring thee alive into the Tsar's hands, as he would have me do, for thou shalt be torn limb from limb.'

'Kill me, then, if thou must, Chelminsky, for all is lost!' he said. 'Thou hast won in the end,

but we have run a good race through life, thou and I!'

'Ride like the devil, man!' I said. 'I will not either kill thee or take thee, but I must seem to strike at thee.'

'Chelminsky,' cried Mazeppa, as his horse galloped a few paces ahead of my own, 'I swear I have been a better friend to thee than to any living soul on this earth. Three times I might have——'

But I interrupted him. 'Ride, you fool,' I said; 'the Tsar watches!'

And at this moment, my horse stumbling over a fallen soldier, Mazeppa's took a good lead; and though I made a show of following out of sight, I returned—to Peter's anger and disappointment—without my quarry.

CHAPTER XL

But one more scene, and I have finished.

The Tsar's anger against Mazeppa did not end with the victory of Pultowa. Mazeppa had escaped into the territory of the Sultan, and the Tsar actually sent a mission into Turkey offering an immense sum for the surrender of his person, alive.

Now in this matter, as in my pursuit of Mazeppa on the battle-field, I played the Tsar false; for, in spite of all I had suffered from the old fox during the long years of our rivalry, I could not see him brought living into the hands of this most ruthless, most savage, most relentless of enemies, Piotr Alexeyevitch.

Therefore, breathing hatred and vengeance against my old rival, I besought the Tsar to allow me to be of the mission, and easily obtained his consent.

With me went a certain young Kotchubey, a deadly enemy of Mazeppa, and another, Kozlof, who loved him no better.

We found Mazeppa in the old ruined mansion

of a Pasha, lent to him by the Sultan, who indignantly refused to listen to the offer of the Tsar. Then we of the Tsar's embassy took counsel together. 'If the Sultan will not let us have the rascal, we must persuade Mazeppa,' said Kozlof, 'that the Tsar will restore to him his favour and the office of Hetman in return for certain secrets concerning the Swedish King which it is necessary that the Tsar should know.'

I made a show of applauding this suggestion.

'But who shall persuade him?' I laughed. 'I think he will suspect thee, Kozlof, and certainly Kotchubey. He and I have been life-long enemies, true, but I complimented him on his fighting at Pultowa, while smiting at him, and it may be that he will believe in my good will.'

Thus I was allowed to undertake the mission.

I found Mazeppa old and broken down. He shed tears when he found it was I that had come.

'Thou wert like God to me on the battle-field, Chelminsky,' he said. 'This mission can be to no evil end, since thou art of it.'

'Mazeppa,' I said, 'God knows why I befriend thee, unless it be that I remember too well the old days, before thy turning against me. It may be that my Vera has softened my heart——'

At her name Mazeppa wept and crossed himself.

'That is a saint!' he said. 'Lord forgive me, I would have done her ill! Thou hadst the best of me there, Chelminsky, and so much the happier am I to-day! Dost know that, if it had been any but thou, I should have killed thee three times?' he added. 'Therefore think not too ill of me.'

'And why, then, was I spared,' said I, with a laugh, 'since thou hast never lacked of thy will for fastidiousness?'

'Well,' he said, 'I will tell thee: I have called thee fool and browbeaten thee, ay, and all but ruined and murdered thee. Nay, I have from time to time hated thee with all my soul; yet, throughout I have after a fashion liked thee too well to destroy thee, and in the end I have always remembered that we two fought those three at Ivan Casimir's Court, and how thou didst ride after me when they stripped and bound me, curse them!'

'Then here I repay you with a last service,' I said. 'Be not deceived by my companions, Mazeppa; our mission is to bring you alive to the Tsar. They will persuade you, as I am now supposed to be persuading you, that Peter will restore to you your office, if you will reveal certain secrets as to the King of Sweden. Do not be persuaded.'

'Am I a fool, Chelminsky?' he laughed. 'Thou hast called me fox many times; be sure I have not changed my skin.'

Then, but a day later, Mazeppa lay dead within the Pasha's mansion, and Kozlof threw a phial into the stove in my presence.

'The old devil would not believe my tale,' he said, 'but threatened to spit me with his sword: that was last night. Some of the stuff from this phial made a rare flavour to his sauce this morning! If the Tsar has failed in his vengeance Kotchubey has not, neither have I.'

'What have you done, Kozlof?' said I, aghast. 'Have you *murdered* him in cold blood?'

'Call it what you like!' he laughed. 'He betrayed Kotchubey's sister and executed her parents, and my father was beheaded by his orders.'

But the people say that Mazeppa died of a broken heart.

His body was brought to Galatz on the Danube, where he was buried—like a true Cossack—within earshot of the rush of a great river. His bones might not lie beside the Dnieper, beloved of Cossacks, because of his treachery towards his Russian master, who became henceforward absolute lord of all the Cossacks' territory.

'What shall I say of Mazeppa,' I asked my Vera, 'that shall end my record both kindly and yet consistently?' For it was Vera who bade me write the tale of our friendship and rivalry, our hatred and our reconciliation.

'I would have you write,' she laughed, 'that Mazeppa was very plausible, yet very transparent; hated by most men, adored by many women; that he was brave and also cowardly; impassioned and fascinating, yet mean and repulsive; he was half man and half devil. The Tsar Peter is also both devil and man, but he is great. Mazeppa was only great while men did not discern how small he was. Say,' Vera ended, 'as you are fond of saying, that "he was a fox."'

THE END

Spottiswoode & Co. Ltd., Printers, New-street Square, London

Z

PR
6045
H1535M3

Whishaw, Frederick J
Mazeppa

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY